

The high cost of booking

Touts are not the only problem. Many of you are also unhappy with high booking fees. Under the Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers (Star) guidelines, member agencies are not supposed to charge more than 25 per cent on fees. But Which? member Hilary Copeland told us about a booking fee of £1.40 on the cost of a £5 ticket to see the Tiffany exhibition at Somerset House in London – a mark-up of 28 per cent. The OFT's 2005 investigation didn't criticise agents' fees and felt in general that there was enough competition between agents to keep the scale of charges down.

Critics on the inside

Yet, even in the industry, there are critics of high booking fees. Nick Blackburn of ticket company Seetickets believes that no agent should charge 25 per cent and cited official agents charging £15 booking fees on £55 tickets for the musical *Spamalot* in London's West End. He said his company usually charged only half that.

And rock promoter Harvey Goldsmith (right) thought that between 5 and 8 per cent was reasonable. 'There's a point when booking fees get out of hand and the promoters and Star need to come to a consensus on a sensible charge,' he said.

We want to see transparent pricing, where authorised agents include the booking fee in the ticket price – hit shows such as *The Sound of Music* already do this. It would also help if agents stuck to standardised wording for charges and didn't use terms such as convenience charge, booking fee or processing fee interchangeably.



Just the ticket

These days, tickets for popular shows sell out in minutes. And touts and some agencies are costing the consumer a fortune

Tickets for Kylie Minogue's comeback shows in London sold out in six minutes. Madonna's 2006 Wembley Arena dates took just ten minutes. The speed with which tickets for popular shows are snapped up leaves most fans frustrated. And if they happen to visit eBay later in the day, that frustration could turn to anger, as the auction site has sellers offering the tickets, often at more than £100 above the face value.

It's not just tickets for gigs. The popularity of hit musicals has led to ticket prices for these being inflated by touts and some agencies (see 'The high cost of booking', left.)

The rise of the internet has helped touts push real fans to the back of the queue. Now the government has called on the ticket industry to do something about it. But that's not as easy as it sounds.

'Touts are useful'

It may be a surprise to learn that reselling tickets at more than face value is not illegal, though street trading can be.

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has accepted the merits of touts, or secondary agents as they are politely called. In a 2005 report, it said they 'can provide a benefit to consumers' who are desperate to get a

ticket. However, the OFT acknowledges that some secondary agents breached consumer protection laws.

Official ticket agents believe the only way to stop touts is by a combination of self-regulation, legislation and a change in the way the public views tickets. The Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers (Star), which represents large agencies such as Ticketmaster and Ticketweb, wants the resale of tickets for concerts, events and theatres banned as it is for football matches. 'We see a ticket as a licence that can be revoked. It gives you the right to see an event subject to certain conditions. You don't own a ticket like a Mars Bar,' said Jonathan Brown of Star.

When they get the chance, agents and promoters cancel tickets resold online and people are then refused entry to concert. But that's only possible when the exact seat location is known, as agents can use it for identification. Consumers should therefore be cautious when buying online at auction sites, as they could find themselves out of pocket and out of the concert.

Star has also identified a rise in 'bedroom touts' – people who buy four tickets, use two and sell the others. And the ticket industry points the finger firmly at internet auction sites such as eBay for encouraging them.

But eBay sees things differently. It thinks tickets are the seller's property and has no

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intention of making sellers print the seat location. It believes promoters are 'acting maliciously' when they cancel tickets, as often people can't get refunds on tickets.

And the industry even admits it can't completely stop touts getting tickets. Repeat-dialling equipment, computer hacking or having students stand in box-office queues are all ways to beat the system.

One solution may be to allow consumers to get refunds more easily, but theatres worry that this will lead to a rush of returns on advance tickets if a show gets bad reviews. To address this, the agent Ticketmaster is launching an exchange service, where returns can be bought by someone else for the same price. However, the seller still pays for the service.

Industry ideas

In another bid to stop touts, this year's Glastonbury Festival will require photo IDs on all tickets, making it impossible to resell them. Another attempt to solve the problem comes in the shape of M-tickets. These are non-transferable barcodes which are sent to your mobile. The industry has also called for a 'shop-a-tout' hotline.

Many in the industry think the government will shy away from banning the resale of tickets. 'I'm not sure the government is going to do what's necessary,' said Nick Blackburn, Managing Director of ticket agency Seetickets. And some think that if legislation isn't used to stop touts, promoters will raise ticket prices to reflect market

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values. Already promoters of some shows, such as Beyoncé's recent tour, are auctioning some tickets to the highest bidders.

'That will be the death of the ticket industry,' warned Rob Ballantine of the Concert Promoters Association. 'But before that happens, we want to show we are doing everything we can to stop touting.'

If the industry wants to be seen to be doing all it can, it needs to make it easier for the public to recognise authorised sellers and websites. It would help if promoters displayed prices more prominently on their adverts, all ticket websites printed seat numbers and face values, and if people were prevented from buying large blocks of seats.

Finally, one piece of good news for the consumer is a new European law, the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, which comes into force this year and will require ticket sellers to provide customers with all relevant details.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

We'd like to hear your experiences of buying tickets. Please email your stories to letters@which.co.uk or write to us at **Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X SG14 1SH.**



'If I'd known the face value, I wouldn't have bothered'

secondary agents, in general you have fewer rights than with a primary agent. If an event is cancelled, you may not get the full amount refunded – in some cases, you may not get a refund. Also beware of some secondary agents selling tickets for shows that haven't yet been announced, as the agent has no tickets to sell. We saw tickets for a summer U2 concert advertised, when there were no official dates.

AGENTS ARE NO ANGELS FOR ROBBIE FAN

Nick Jenkins 48, mason

Nick saw an advert in the *Daily Mail* for Robbie Williams' tickets at £150 each. 'I thought, "I can't afford that", but I really wanted to see him,' he said. He bought two tickets on www.krystalsboxoffice.co.uk, only to find, when he received them, that they had a face value of £45 each.

'I was gutted. I don't mind paying more, but if I'd known the face value, I wouldn't have bothered,' he said.

Krystalsboxoffice was unavailable for comment. It is against the law to sell tickets without stating the face value and if you see tickets advertised like this, you should be wary. If you are dealing with any

Checklist

How to beat the touts, get the best ticket deals and be covered if things go wrong

■ **Star names** A reputable agent should publish the face value, the booking fee and the seat location. Many of the biggest official agents are members of Star. For more details, visit www.s-t-a-r.org.uk

■ **Refunds** Check whether you will get a refund if the event is cancelled. Star members' refunds include the booking fee, but others such as Seetickets will return only the face value. Watch out for agents who deny refunds or limit them if a performance doesn't happen.

■ **Buy direct** Buying from the box office can avoid high booking fees. If the box office doesn't have a booking line or you can't get there, you could check what's available and send a cheque and a stamped addressed envelope instead.

■ **Shop around** Don't assume there is only one agent selling tickets, as booking fees vary.

■ **Other options** If the show is sold out, tickets may be available on a hotel and theatre package such as www.superbreak.com or with a dinner and theatre package such as www.london-discount-theatre.com

■ **In the know** Get email updates from ticket websites such as www.ticketmaster.co.uk and www.seetickets.com or from theatre and venue sites.

■ **Booths** You can buy discounted London theatre tickets in person for that day's show at official booths in London's Canary Wharf and Leicester Square.

■ **Last minute** Late offers may be on www.lastminute.com

■ **Fan fair** Websites such as www.scarletmist.co.uk and www.stoptout.com let music fans buy and sell unused tickets at face value or less.