

Travel Agent Who Stole \$250,000 In Bookings From Her Agency Gets Jail Time

by [Cheryl Rosen](#) / May 18, 2017

I'll start with the ending, as I know that's what everyone wants to hear. Yes, she is going to jail. And no, she did not respond to my request for an interview. But still, this is a tale that travel agents everywhere want to – and need to – hear.

At 2 p.m. on Wednesday, May 16, former travel agent Melissa Sutton was sentenced to the maximum allowed by law, 10 years in the penitentiary, in the case of the State of South Dakota vs. Melissa Kaye Sutton.

Sutton had previously pleaded guilty to Grand Theft, a Class 4 felony, acknowledging that she “did obtain property of another, namely, All About Travel, Inc., by deception, in that the Defendant failed to correct a false impression which she previously created or reinforced, or which she knew to be influencing another to whom she stood in a fiduciary or confidential relationship...against the peace and dignity of the State of South Dakota.”

Sutton, who at the time was a full-time employee of All About Travel, **admitted to diverting the bookings of 39 clients**, worth about \$250,000, and thereby causing All About Travel to lose \$25,000 in commissions, between July and November of 2015. She rebooked the reservations through her own travel agency, Toes in the Sand Travel, and a host agency, whose name TMR has been cautioned about repeating under threat of lawsuit by its legal counsel, as it was not found guilty of any crime in connection with this case.

(Let me just say right here that any agent looking for a host agency should consider first checking it out on a review site like Host Agency Reviews, and speak to travel agents in the industry about its reputation. Since the first story ran, *TMR* has received an alarming number of telephone calls and emails from travel agents who say they are owed thousands of dollars in back commissions – in some cases, every dollar in commission to which they ever were entitled – by the same host agency.)

But back to the story of Ms. Sutton. The judge on Tuesday suspended her sentence on condition that she not commit any like offenses during the 10-year term, Karen Schroedermeier, owner of All About Travel, told *TMR*. But Sutton still will have to serve the maximum applicable under the plea bargain to which she agreed, 180 days of punishment. That will begin with 14 days in the county jail starting Tuesday, June 6. She then will serve 90 days in a work release program, and for the remaining 76 days will wear an electronic monitoring device.

In addition, her passport has been revoked, limiting her access to the travel industry – something Schroedermeier said is extremely uncommon, but somehow particularly meaningful, in a case like this.

She also will make full restitution, beginning with an \$8,000 check she delivered to the court on Wednesday and continuing at the rate of \$350 a month until the balance is repaid in full.

The day in court

“Of course I was there in court, and I had great support; we had a good following, all of us who had been employed at All About Travel, some spouses and friends,” Schroedermeier said. “It started out with the defense stating its case, which was basically that it was a mistake; Melissa basically apologized to the court and admitted she made a mistake. She indicated that she understands that ignorance of the law is no excuse. But she never apologized to me or to All About Travel.

“Our side was that you don’t make a mistake 35 times over five months; at some point you made a decision, you made a choice to continue to do this.”

The judge was very attentive and referenced a lot of documents the two sides had submitted, including Schroedermeier’s victim impact statement and emails Sutton had sent to her clients, saying she was opening her own agency, Toes in the Sand Travel, “and how it was all hush hush” about her switching their reservations from her current employer to the new agency.

“It really was very interesting when you put it together, as the judge did, that she incorporated as Toes in the Sand, but continued to sit at a desk in our office earning a salary up until the time she was terminated,” Schroedermeier said. Still, “I don’t think she was expecting the sentence she got; on the day she was terminated she said to the gals in the office, ‘You don’t understand I had to do it for my family. She said her husband had lost his job and had been unemployed for several months.’ “

In the end, Schroedermeier said, “pretty much everyone felt it was a very fair sentence – I feel it’s fair, I feel the judge did an amazing job, she read all of

the documents, she had them flagged so she could reference and read back the parts she felt were important. I felt a judge who put forth that much effort was very fair. I've spoken to just about everyone on my staff and while some would have liked to have seen a longer sentence, overall everyone is very happy that it's over."

Lessons learned

So what has Schroedermeier learned from all this? "The first and foremost thing is to call the police, to let the state determine the crime," she said. "You don't have to hire an attorney, you can let the state determine if there has been a crime."

Second, be proactive to prevent problems. Have an attorney review your employee contracts "to make sure everything is in place so that when something like this happens you have a contract you know is sound to move forward on."

And third, remember that people change, and be vigilant. "When Melissa started with All About Travel it was six years into her career, and I am sure she never had the intent to do something like this. But you never know how someone can change down the road. So how can you prevent this? Keep an eye on everything people are doing – I'm not saying monitor their email, but check the invoices that everyone is running every 30 days to see if they are on track with their bookings the previous year. Other than that I don't know there's a lot you can do – when you start micromanaging people you are going to lose good employees."

In the end, Schroedermeier said, "I do really hope people in the industry will learn from this story, whether it be someone who has maybe thought that what they were doing was right and now they realize it isn't, or deterring someone from committing a fraudulent act, or owners being more aware that you can press charges in a case like this."

And she is grateful to her employees, "I could never have done this without the support of the employees I work with;" she said. "It was very nice to see our friends and family in court to show their support. It's real now, it's no longer just a story to be told. I know I'm not over it, I don't know if I'll ever be over it. I can't allow it to make me view my employees differently, though I'm sure if you talked to them they'd say things are different because of what transpired."

But Schroedermeier is determined to move on. She has hired new staff and business is "right on target, with some very strong months ahead that appear to be larger than last year, now that we have gotten through all the

distractions and people are focusing back on the job. I look at the future numbers and things are very promising.

Editor's note: This is a very unusual story in that the travel agency owner prosecuted – but it is far from a unique occurrence. I'd like to encourage our readers to post their thoughts and start a broader industry discussion of the topic on TMR's home page, travelmarketreport.com, or on our TravelMarketReport and Cheryl Rosen Facebook pages, where the story will appear.