

Technologies that work for the modern air traveler

Introduction

Air travel is a customer centric business and a lot of airline time, effort and money is spent on ensuring a high quality and consistent customer experience. While a lot of the customer experience is to do with human interaction, there is a lot of technology that goes in behind the scenes as well as into customer facing processes. This article looks at how airlines are using technology to gain a double edge – enhance customer experience and also reduce costs.

Before the trip – complete control over the travel itinerary...

E-ticketing and travel portals have revolutionized the way we plan our travel – even travel agents prefer to issue e-tickets. Most important, the whole process has become less time consuming, offers significantly more choice, can be availed anytime and is cost effective for the customer, travel agent and airline.

Integrated itineraries allow for booking stay, local transport etc as bundled offers and help save time and money. Customers can even choose preferred seats and compare fares with other airlines before booking - all of which gives complete choice to the customer and that includes convenient payment options. Some innovative companies include Orbitz, Travelocity, Cheaptickets, Expedia; makemytrip & travelguru (in India).

Technologies and some of the players...

Most of the technology is web based and while the portal is custom built, the services are integrated through ready to use service offerings from players in the value chain. Thus secure payment gateways are provided by banks, mobile alerts through cellular companies, content maintained through web content providers (e.g. Worldspan) and live feed providers, location specific information by specialist providers such as AccuWeather, Mapquest and Frommers, email communication solutions by Kana and Eplison; even third party services for monitoring multiple reward point programs (points.com) ! Most of such companies are technology partners to airline companies and travel intermediaries.

During the check in and boarding....

For this phase, technology works mostly behind the scenes to ensure a seamless Passenger Interaction. Back office systems players take over several processes before a customer actually walks in and boards - examples include booking and related logistics (Amadeus, Galileo, Sabre etc); next generation reservation & distribution from players such as Navitaire; CRM technologies that capture customer preferences, analytics, behavior, request patterns, meal preferences etc. – some of the key players include Cendant, Navitaire, Wipro etc and customized solutions by industry consortia such as Star Alliance).

Customer facing technologies that are used include IVRs and automated reminders, flight status alerts, check in interactive / information kiosks, baggage identification and tagging (bar codes & RFID), security etc.

While on the flight....

On board the flight especially on long haul flights, telephone systems, web access, interactive television and seats fitted out to use laptops are some of the simple examples that ensure that customers remain connected with their work and the world and also get entertainment content on a personal television. Back end technology facilitates all of this and increasingly digital content has replaced conventional systems.

Post the journey....

Customers can still log in and check your miles status or reclaim them and interact with the airline to describe their travel experience. This can be done through the web or through sophisticated contact centers. Last but not the least; customers can complain if they did not have a good experience as a customer.

Summary

Increased competition and high cost structures in the airline industry has over the last 6-8 years triggered off several initiatives amongst the airlines to reduce cost as well as enhance customer experience. The internet provided the perfect medium to simplify and offer a large set of services both directly as well as through travel market intermediaries and channels to dramatically improve the customer experience. The cost savings has also been passed on to customers through innovative discount pricing and promotions.

The web has also helped airlines and their travel partners come together and create a level playing field of services that has one clear focus – attract, satisfy and retain travelers. Airlines are one of the few industries where CRM (Contact and Analytics) has actually worked in practice and provided an interaction platform that benefits both the traveler and the service provider. Maybe we could call this phenomenon the 'mobile airborne digital lifestyle' considering that it allows people to stay connected with their work and home and be entertained all at a price!