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Self Serve: Airlines Increasingly Employ Customer-Enabling Tools

As customers come to expect, and demand, self-service check-in tools, airlines can also use them to reduce costs and explore new revenue opportunities.

■ By Mark Canton | Ascend Contributor

Today's travelers demand service tailored to meet their individual needs. They are comfortable with new technology and expect airlines to embrace new and exciting tools to improve customer service and enhance their travel experience. At the same time, airlines are continually striving to reduce the cost of processing passengers and providing increased levels of customer service. As traffic recovers, airlines will want to maximize their resources and provide high levels of service to the additional passengers without substantially increasing staff levels.

Airlines are embracing a strong trend toward self-service to accomplish these seemingly contradictory objectives. Self-service technologies have been readily adopted in other consumer arenas — such as banks with automatic teller machines and Internet banking, and grocery stores providing self-service check out. Airlines are no different, leveraging this automation to perform key functions such as travel planning, flight reservations and, now, flight check in.

Moving to Automation

The trend to deploy self-service technology has rapidly accelerated since the late 1990s. Most major U.S.- and European-based airlines have installed self-service check-in kiosks at



Photo by Mark Canton



Above: Web check-in tools can provide an easy-to-use process for quick check in.

Above right: Self-serve kiosks are popular because they reduce time travelers spend waiting in lines.

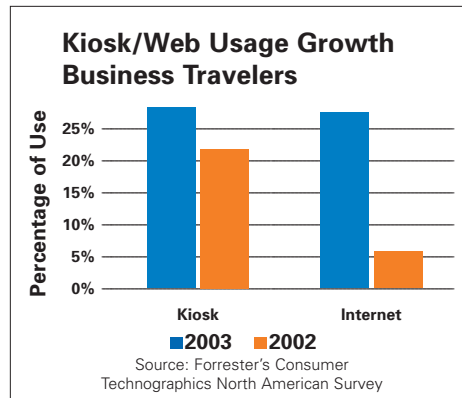
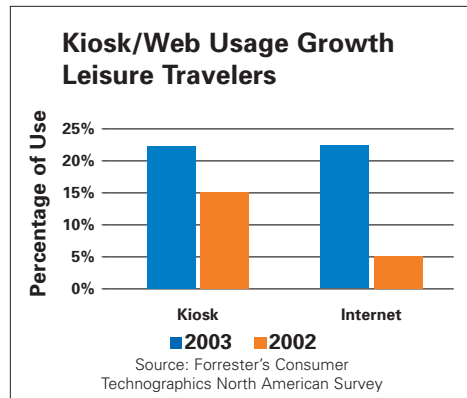
where the major carriers are beginning to deploy kiosks and other self-service technology.

However, for those airlines where self-service is available and aggressively marketed, acceptance has increased among both busi-

ness and leisure travelers. Internet check in has experienced the most dramatic usage growth, increasing by more than 400 percent from 2002 to 2003 among both business and leisure travelers.

Use of self-service kiosks also continues to rise, increasing 20 percent from 2002 to 2003. Those most likely to use kiosks or the Internet for check in are the experienced, frequent travelers. These passengers appreciate the convenience of self service and are more likely to repay the airline for that convenience with repeat business.

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The Importance of Self-Service Technology

The deployment of self-service technology has become an important strategy for most airlines. Kiosks and Internet check in are only part of the overall strategy. Self service can actually lead to a complete overhaul of the day-of-departure process as airlines seek to improve efficiencies, reduce costs and retain customers.

In general, the business benefits of self service can be separated into three categories:

- Customer service improvements such as reducing check-in lines, improving handling of irregular operations and automating service recovery processes.
- Cost savings including reducing staff required to handle irregular operations and reducing the requirement for airport space.

More travelers, business and leisure, are using kiosks and the Internet to check in for flights. Among leisure travelers, kiosk use has increased almost 10 percent from 2002 to 2003, and use of the Internet for check in climbed more than 15 percent. Among business travelers, kiosk use increased about 5 percent and Internet check in rose more than 20 percent during the same time period.

hightech

News on New and Improved Products and Services from Sabre Airline Solutions

product

Sabre® AirServ® Galley Manager

description

The Galley Manager for airline galley provisioning planning is the latest enhancement to the Sabre® AirServ® aircraft provisioning suite. The Galley Manager offers a graphical user interface enabling airline inflight service planning departments to allocate aircraft provisioning based on volume and weight constraints of aircraft galleys. The first phase of this application was released in January, and additional operational functionality will continue to be added in phases throughout the year.

benefits


The Galley Manager enables airlines to plan the loading of the aircraft galleys with automatic monitoring of the weight being

loaded and available space within each galley and position. The Galley Manager creates significant efficiencies for airline service planners by providing easy-to-use tools for creation of the aircraft overview, loading the galleys and reporting to field locations via the Web.

features

- **Usability** — Offers intuitive user interfaces that model many of the current manual business processes in place today. Combined with features such as “drag-and-drop” placement, automatic weight capacity monitoring, space availability and rich graphical capability, these tools make the task of loading the various services easy to manage.
- **Illustration** — Provides tools that enable the drawing or importation of aircraft overviews. Users can assemble galleys from a pre-defined set of stencils and customize the galley appearance of each fleet and sub-fleet type. Users of

the Galley Manager can associate the physical tail numbers of each aircraft to the appropriate overview.

- **Performance** — Provides users with the ability to manage large volumes of data quickly. The quick desktop performance enables products to be moved efficiently around an aircraft and within a galley.
- **Web-based reporting** — Provides authorized personnel with access to reports via the Web with no proprietary client software required, always giving users access to the latest version of the product.
- **Graphical navigation** — Utilizes graphical navigation such as form-based screens for all entries, drop-down lists and buttons, and on-screen help to efficiently set up loading plans with increased accuracy. These user interfaces enable planners to be quickly trained, freeing them to utilize system functionality that previously had been manually cumbersome to create and maintain. 



- Revenue opportunities such as selling upgrades during check in, collecting applicable fees and selling additional amenities.

One of the key benefits realized through the implementation of self service is the equitable and uniform application of airline policies, ensuring that all users adhere to airline and security procedures during check in. Adding to that benefit is the reduction in overall time spent by passengers at airports waiting to check in, allowing for a more secure process and more satisfied customers.

The New Generation of Self Service

Hardware, software and communications infrastructure are key technological components that must be carefully considered when developing a self-service strategy. The first generation of self-service kiosks provided hardware features similar to those found in the second generation of devices: a colorful touch-screen interface, credit card readers, printers for boarding passes and bag tags. The second generation of kiosk devices — such as those available through the *Sabre® Aerodynamic Traveler™* passenger processing solutions — are providing additional capability, including passport readers, biometric interfaces and access to different systems such as those for customer relationship management and frequent flyer data.

Much of the increased functionality in this new generation of kiosks can be attributed to the use of a “thin-client architecture” software distribution methodology. Instead of loading all of the check-in and host interface application software on each device, the software runs in a central environment and is accessed via a Web browser application installed on each device. This methodology simplifies the software update process, improves overall control of the kiosk units and enables the reuse of check-in applications in a variety of environments such as kiosk, Web or mobile devices.

In fact, recently introduced common-use self-service, or CUSS, standards require the deployment of thin-client applications for use on common-use kiosks. These

Benefits of Self-Service Technology

Customer service improvements	Cost savings	Revenue opportunities
Reduced queuing time at check in	Reduction in the number of staff needed to handle a given number of customers	Possibility to sell upgrades at check in
Improved consistency in applying airline policies and following procedures	Reduction in staff required to handle irregular operations	Enforcement of booking conditions and collection of required applicable fees
Improved handling of irregular operations	Faster passenger throughput in airport terminals	Capability to sell add-ons, such as standby fees, meal/beverage coupons
Automated service recovery processes according to airline policy	Reduced requirement for airport space	Release of terminal space for more profitable use, i.e. retail or catering

Source: Giga Research

In addition to being popular among travelers and a way to differentiate an airline from its competition, the use of self-serve technologies, such as kiosks and Internet-based check in, offer opportunities to improve customer service, achieve cost-savings and provide potential revenue opportunities.

International Air Transport Association standards enable the sharing of kiosk devices by airlines at a given airport, much as workstations, printers and gate readers are shared today at SITA and ARINC shared-system airports. This will help eliminate the capital cost outlay for kiosk units and communications for airlines, improve space utilization, and provide an additional source of revenue for airport authorities. Today, there are only a handful of CUSS airports — Las Vegas McCarran International Airport, Aéroport Nice Côte D’Azur and Vancouver International Airport. However, this number is expected to increase dramatically as airports strive to regain lost space and look for ways to increase revenue opportunities.

Future Expectations

Industry analysts project that in three to five years, 80 percent of all airlines’ check-in transactions worldwide will be self service. That is a monumental goal to achieve, but one that is

being pursued diligently as airlines seek to improve service and cut costs.

In addition, the introduction of newer technology such as mobile phones, personal digital assistants and improved wireless communications at airports will open the door for even more self-service opportunities. These new devices are now able to leverage the same thin-client architecture to perform airline functions, and it’s just a matter of time before airlines begin to deploy these new customer service tools.

Security concerns may have an adverse impact on the adoption of new technologies for check in. But industry sources expect these issues to be addressed in time and the expansion of self service to continue within the travel industry. **E**

Mark Canton is senior manager of airport products. He can be contacted at mark.canton@sabre.com

+count it up

1,312 Length in feet of the world’s shortest international airport runway — located at the Juancho Yrausquin Airport in Saba, Dutch West Indies, which is surrounded by 130-foot cliffs.