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ascend

Taking your airline to new heights

A man in a dark pinstriped suit and tie is smiling and holding a small white model airplane. He is standing in front of a window with horizontal blinds. The background is slightly out of focus.

World's Happiest Airline

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TRAVEL AGENT OF THE FUTURE

As technology continues to advance inexorably on all fronts, travel agents and agencies continue to evolve, with their business success anchored upon and closely tied to technological advances. As the highest-yielding sales channel, it's essential that these capabilities are developed to support agencies.

■ By Jenn Petric | *Ascend* Contributor

Technology has always been — and will always be — a mission-critical component of the agency channel within the travel industry.

In fact, a strong argument can be made that because of its global demands for quick, timely, accurate and highly accessible yet ever-changing information, the travel industry has long been a key element spurring innovation and expansive development in information technology.

It's also quite evident that the broad range of technologies employed by travel agents over the years has helped make the agency sales channel a vital element in the marketing plan of almost every airline. Burgeoning travel technology has enabled the agent to draw up the best itinerary for the individual traveler and efficiently fulfill and service the end-to-end travel-reservations process.

And the trend continues. Every day, technology seems to evolve even more rapidly than the day before — changing, among other things, the way significant numbers of people connect and interact.

Some of these changes have effectively made the technologies that agencies use more accessible, scalable and easy to use, and the changes have also enabled “virtual” connections and relationships throughout the channel — from airline, to agent, to consumer.

HIGHLIGHT

Technology has always been a mission-critical component of the agency channel within the travel industry.

Nonetheless, for the agency path to remain the highest-yielding sales channel, which it has traditionally been for carriers worldwide, this sometimes mind-boggling progression in technology must be closely associated with and directly applied to fundamental needs within the travel industry.

For example, new communication conduits that have recently emerged require instant knowledge and answers, virtual relationships, and constant interaction. So travel agents must be fully equipped with the appropriate technology to enable them to effectively participate in these communications arenas.



Because of the broad range of information technology used by travel agents, this channel has become essential to most airlines' marketing plans. For agents to continue to quickly produce the best results for travelers and effectively complete the reservations process on behalf of carriers, technology must be available in a scalable form.

New sales models such as the corporate call center and the “remote agent” must have full capability to take advantage of these technologies in the same ways a “traditional” agent can.

To accommodate these new sales models, the latest applications and functionalities must be available in a scalable form.

The *Sabre Travel Network*[®] vision for the future captures the emerging technologies that not only cross through the travel industry but serve to indelibly alter its landscape. These technologies will not only enhance the agent's service capabilities in dealing with the end consumer but will also continue to elevate the agent's performance and genuine value as a sales channel to airlines.

There are several major categories of technological development that are currently in the process of fundamentally altering the ways in which the agency channel works — with what may often prove to be startlingly positive productivity developments.

Multi Touch

Multi-touch technologies incorporate multiple touch points to enable the travel agent to manage and manipulate applications and data via LCD- or camera-based screen projection.

Because multi-touch technologies are designed not only to enable but to prompt and encourage greater efficiencies through multi-tasking on the parts of travel agents, these technologies provide critical time-saving booking capabilities — fostering collaboration-based environments and applications, and introducing new, more-efficient workflow patterns.

The overall result: greater efficiency and productivity, meaning more bookings per agent/hour.

Transparent Assistance

Transparent assistance technologies are basically intelligent robotics that will be employed to manage proactive notifications of events and what might be referred to as behind-the-scenes intuitiveness of modern applications.

The essential importance of transparent assistance lies in several levels of enhancement of the work experience for the individual agent, greatly increasing the capability to automate tasks that the agent previously performed manually.

These technologies essentially streamline the agent workflow while lessening any necessary training time and, once again, increasing agent productivity. Enhanced productivity, of course, means more bookings and completed sales transactions per agent/hour.

Mobile Commerce

Mobile commerce represents the greater trend in the movement of business and social exchanges from personal computers to mobile devices. It's a trend no one can possibly miss. In fact, the vast majority are already putting this technological advance into high gear simply by adopting and using more and more advanced communications devices (it's no longer really even accurate to refer to these devices as cell phones — many

of them essentially amount to mini-PCs that people carry everywhere).

The entire movement toward mobile commerce effectively creates a critical need to think differently about business transactions in general — and there's a further inherent expectation on the parts of consumers that more-advanced on-the-go applications are inevitably in the offering (which they undoubtedly are, although it's currently unknown what many of those applications will be).

But from a standpoint of the traveling public, one thing's for sure: It's where airline customers will be, and that makes it absolutely critical that the agent channel have a strong presence in this space. Many savvy and resourceful travel agents are already there.

Operational Intelligence

Operational intelligence will couple real-time operational insight with the immediate ability to act upon critical elements within the business.

With more immediate capability to act, the agent is more likely to achieve positive results. Overall operational efficiency is thereby enhanced through ever-improved decision making.

And streamlined operations are created through improved operational intelligence, elevating customer-service levels and helping ensure greater consistency in the quality of the customer experience.

Social Media

Social media actively represents and provides methods of communication combining technology with social interactions.

Once again, social media encompasses some of the critical places customers are to be found — both today and in the future. But social media also enhances other vital agency capabilities such as accelerating information deployment and contributing to the growing trend of viral marketing, which serves to quickly build brand awareness.

In addition, widespread consumer acceptance of social media has led customers to pick up the ball and run with it. Consumers use social media to discuss products, services and the companies that deliver them — those that have tapped into social media outlets can enable transparent communications and accept direct feedback from customers.

And those companies are largely being rewarded for their openness and innovation in communicating with the people who buy their products and services. In a service industry and distribution channel such as that represented by the travel agent, the customer relationships that can be developed through social media are invaluable.

Fully Embracing Technology

All of these technologies support a more productive workflow never previously imagined and, as a result, agents will be faster and more efficient. Efficiency will lead to an

increase in bookings per agent, which will mean more bookings overall.

Enabling an agent to achieve multiple tasks at once accommodates complex reservations and workflows. Changes can be promptly processed, so the more complicated transactions such as refunds and exchanges can be performed quickly and with consistent quality.

Operational efficiency in a corporate call center essentially means that an agency can be nimble and make policy or workflow changes (which come down from carriers and client corporations) on the fly. Enabling greater degrees of consistency and quality control upfront will effectively prevent these types of changes from interfering with the agency's ability to continue productively creating reservations.

Accelerating information deployment enables agencies to receive information from carriers faster than ever before. Giving an agent important information enables the agent to make the best possible decision when booking within the point of sale.

With the agency channel being the highest-yielding sales channel — particularly in the corporate segment — it is crucial that these powerful technologies are molded into solutions that support agencies. These capabilities will contribute to reducing carriers' costs, creating the ideal business scenario for all parties in the channel.

Technologies such as mobile check-in have the potential to drive operational costs out of a carrier's business model.

And the global distribution system has and will continue to provide powerful capabilities that encompass the content, services and workflow enabling productivity and efficiency in the agency channel, providing carriers what may prove to be enormous returns on their longer-term investment. ■



Sabre Travel Network's vision for the future includes the development of superior technologies that not only support the entire travel industry but also permanently enhance its overall environment. These advancements will continue to boost agents' performance and true worth as a sales channel to airlines.

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