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Domestic Airlines, Airports, Passengers and TSA Agree on Moving Out

John Purnell
AIRPORT BUSINESS Contributor

April 16, 2007 -- If ever there was ever a Win-Win-Win-Win in the aviation business, it is about redefining the passenger experience such that the ticket counter is a means of last resort.

Checking in for a flight is now a virtual process. Airline kiosks have moved the process away from the ticket counter. Common-use kiosks now offer airports the ability to move the process anywhere on the airport and off the airport to train stations, convention centers, hotels and sports venues. The Internet has even pushed the process to our home computers.

The checked baggage process is also migrating off of the airport. There are now at least three viable remote bag check-in service providers operating at more than a handful of markets. The stupendous success of Disney's Magical Express demonstrates that rethinking the process can enhance the travel experience and simultaneously lower congestion in baggage handling systems.

U.S. airports are "virtualizing" themselves. They are selecting new process models rather than pouring concrete to expand the old process model. In that transformation the airports are realizing new revenue opportunities with lower capital costs.

Airlines are cutting costs. The unit cost of an Internet-issued boarding pass is zero dollars. That is a very compelling business case. Imagine telling the passengers of 15 years ago that they would have to pay for their own boarding pass stock. That would have been outrageous, but now it is becoming the norm. At one very typical airport, only one in four passengers uses the ticket counter.

And even the TSA realizes some benefits. Instead of 45 minutes to handle the passenger and checked bags, the TSA can have hours. This means they can manage the peaks better and optimize their headcount restricted labor force. And more time translates to better security. The TSA has more time to react to suspicious information from both the passenger and their hold baggage.

Lastly, the passengers love it. No lines, fewer steps to the plane, and a plethora of options for when and where to check-in. Average kiosk transaction times are 60 percent of counter transaction times without the lines.

When have the interests of so many players in the aviation marketplace been so well aligned? Perhaps we, as an industry, are finally thinking outside of the airport terminal box.

Extensive high speed wireless deployment will allow for these unfettered processes to happen on the move. Check-in on the mass transit train. Check your luggage on your front porch. Conduct screening at the venue or on the bus and drive straight to the gate. Or better yet, straight to the aircraft!

So what's a brick and mortar airport to make of this unilateral trend? We must stop thinking of airports as facilities composed of walls, roofs, and runways. The airport is the process, not the place. This virtualization is new unclaimed intellectual real estate. If airports don't own the process then air carriers, the TSA and third parties will claim this new territory for their own and airports will be marginalized.

John Purnell is the principal consultant with Annapolis-based Inspired Data Solutions, which develops and implements technology solutions for aviation, airports and surface transportation.

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