Collaborative
response to the challenges of flight bookability

Travelport
Redefining travel commerce

Executive summary

Whether you're a traveler searching for a flight on the Web, or a travel agent using a global distribution system (GDS), you expect to book any flight available on your screen. But a big challenge facing the travel industry is that this is not always the case.

When available flights are in fact unavailable, or there are disparities between the cost displayed and the actual cost of the flight, there are consequences for the airline, the travel agency and the GDS. If travelers and travel agents can't make their bookings or have a poor experience, flights aren't sold, revenue is lost and the cost of sale increases. And the effects on customer loyalty can be extremely damaging.

The cause of such booking challenges is complex. Given the large number of people simultaneously booking travel, it could be that the air fare has been sold to a speedier traveler or travel agent. But it could also be the complexity of the trip, the path the flight content follows to reach the end traveler, or the technologies and systems in place.

Airlines, GDSs, and travel agencies all have a part to play, which means any solution needs to involve all three parties working together. As one of the world's largest GDS systems, Travelport is in an excellent position to facilitate a collaborative response to such challenges. It has a dedicated strategy and team devoted to working with all its partner airlines and travel agencies alike to create a comprehensive solution.

The issue of available flights turning out to be subsequently unavailable will never be eliminated altogether. But working together can reduce the impact of availability problems to an absolute minimum.

A collaborative response to the challenges of flight availability

Sometimes available flights turn out to be unavailable. And each time this happens, the implications are huge for those in the travel industry.

We all know the feeling

Imagine you're a traveler, and you've just spent a good few hours searching the Web for your perfect trip. You've researched all the relevant options, whittled them down and found flights for a great price. But then, when you try to book, the fare is suddenly no longer available or cannot be booked. You're going to be annoyed; you're going to be frustrated. And you're going to have to start searching all over again.

The challenge of flights that appear available but cannot be subsequently booked is called bookability. The name bookability is also Travelport's term for the relative measurement of how many flights appear available on either the agency's point of sale or a website and are subsequently unavailable at the time of booking.

Sadly, the booking failure rate is never 0% which can cause difficulties for everyone involved in the travel industry.

Indeed, as the opportunity to make a booking has been missed, the airline, the travel agency and the GDS all risk losing their revenue. Costs of sale increase too, as additional acquisition activities are needed to drive new sales. And even if an alternative flight is booked, the traveler or travel agent is likely to feel dissatisfied and irritated, and reputations

may inevitably suffer.

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The challenges of complexity

So why does this happen? Often, people assume it's an irritating technical blip. But in truth, the problem is far more complex.

In some cases, bookability issues occur simply due to the lag time between finding a flight and booking it. In the time it takes to leave the computer and make a cup of coffee, an air fare might have been sold to a speedier traveler or agent.

Yet there are times when the fare availability information displayed on screen was incorrect or out of date in the first place. These failures are likely to be driven by the complexity of the path the flight content follows to reach the end traveler.

One of the most important variables at work is the highly sophisticated yield management system used by airlines to control what availability is publicized to whom and under what circumstances. The airline yield management system can prioritize the availability options that are presented based on their business goals and targets. For example, the system might optimize sales across multi-stop routes or long haul destinations so that overall flight sales will be maximized. Through these changes, flight availability could be impacted.

The yield management system needs to exist in an intimate relationship with the sales system. Small programing errors in the communication between the airline system and the GDS can affect the information passed to the GDS, and ultimately cause problems for those wishing to make a booking. Each airline has a different method of selling its flights – and the GDS must understand how they all work and ensure the correct processes and communication principles are in place.

Not surprisingly, travel agencies aren't immune to technical challenges of their own. They access flight content from multiple sources including the GDS, APIs, metasites and supplier websites – all of which have their own availability system and process. And the complexity and risk of bookability challenges increases with the number of different booking platforms involved. Perhaps the most important way travel agencies can improve accuracy is to optimize their work-flows to match the different systems and processes of these content sources.

An additional factor influencing bookability could be that of the trip itself. For example, when booking multi-segment trips, the risk of booking failure increases due to the complexities of aligning content across each segment.

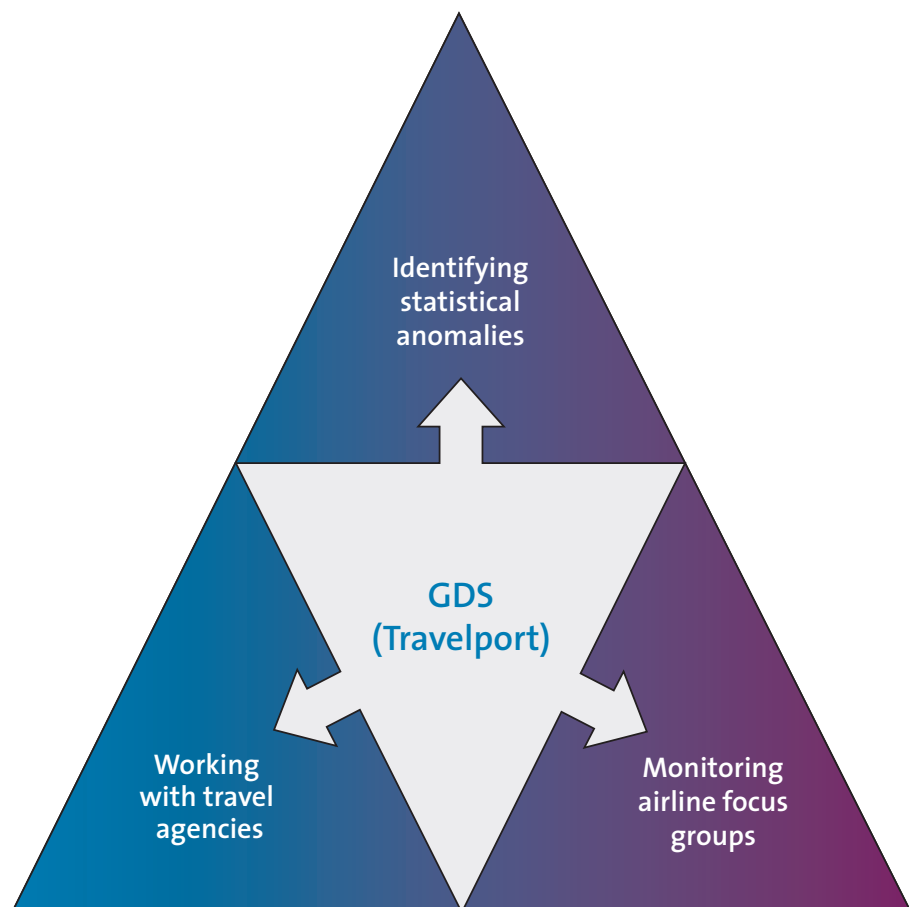## Complex problems deserve collaborative responses

As the airline, the travel agency and the GDS can all play a part in the bookability of flights, efforts to reduce the impact must be collaborative. As one of the world's largest GDS providers, with links to both the agencies
and the airlines, Travelport believes we're in a prime position to facilitate such a response.

Working with the hundreds of airlines in our system, and tens of thousands of travel agency customers, we are able to proactively spot where bookability issues are occurring and take steps to rectify them.

We identify statistical anomalies

With our massive database, the first thing we do is conduct analysis in order to identify any statistical anomalies which might cause unusually high booking failure rates. We also have automated alerts that are constantly running in the background and notify us if a statistical anomaly appears.

It's a broad sweep and picks up anomalies no matter where they are occurring. Monitoring in this way enables Travelport to spot issues quickly, locate the root cause of the problem and take the necessary steps to solve the problem.

Identifying
statistical
anomalies

GDS
(Travelport)

Working
with travel
agencies

Monitoring
airline focus
groups

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We monitor a focus group of airlines

The second way we tackle bookability issues is through a close working relationship with a small focus group of airlines. These airlines are chosen because they create the largest impact to our agency's bookability. Typically, we will closely monitor their bookability failure rates and provide individual weekly feedback and consultations.

In one case, we noticed that the booking failure rates of one particular airline suddenly took a dramatic turn for the worse. What's more, the problem happened overnight. We contacted the airline to find out what had happened, and discovered that they had implemented a new yield management system which offered travel agencies and travelers different availability. To address the problem, the airline joined a special task force and we were able to work with both the airline and the travel agency to tweak their booking flow. Bookability rates quickly improved.
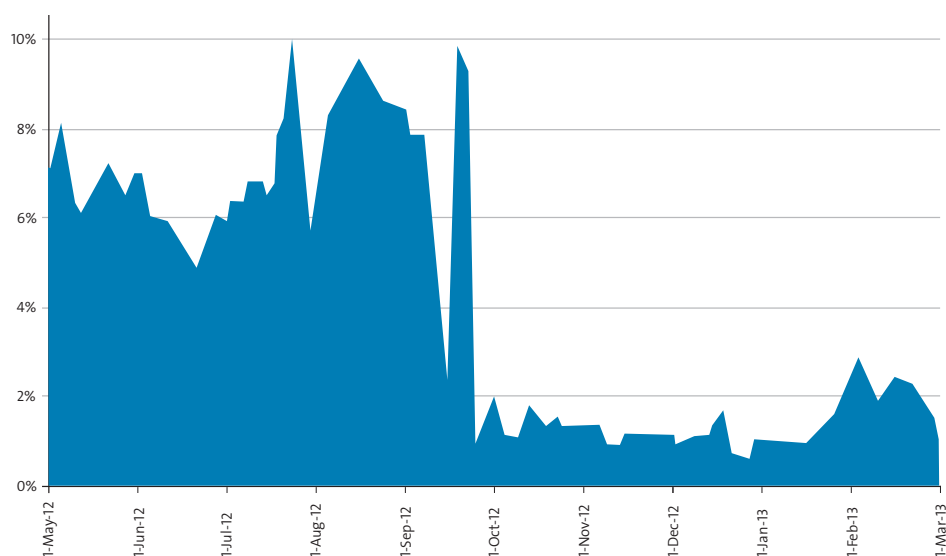
We work with top travel agencies to fine-tune the entire system

Finally, we work with some of the largest travel agencies in the world in order to fine-tune the entire system.

On one occasion, we discovered an agency was experiencing a 10% bookability failure rate when trying to book flights with one particular airline. A simple change to the booking flow logic made the failure rates plummet to just 1%.

In this case the benefit was significant for just one agency. However, having identified the problem, we shared this solution with other agencies to improve the situation for everyone.

A spike in one airline's booking failure rate prompted immediate action to correct.

The final word

Bookability challenges will never be totally eliminated. The systems and processes are too varied and complex for that. But as an industry, we can strive to reduce the impact of bookability problems to an absolute minimum. As this paper highlights, that means everyone pitching in and doing their bit – the airlines, the travel agencies and the GDSs alike.

When any party makes an improvement, more flights are sold, the travel booker enjoys a more positive experience, and reputations are protected.

As a major GDS provider, sitting between the airlines and the travel agencies, Travelport has a crucial role to play in facilitating better bookability rates. By working closely with our partners, we are doing just that.

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