

High-Touch TMC Travelbusiness Automates Seat Alerts With ExpertFlyer *By Jay Boehmer*

Catering to a high-touch client base that includes C-level pharmaceutical executives and financial investors, Travelbusiness offers an unusual guarantee: Travelers won't get stuck in a middle seat "without knowing about it and signing off the day before," said executive travel consultant Alex Irmberg.

To deliver the promise of its so-called Seatwatch program, agents at the Palm Springs, Calif.-based corporate travel agency previously spent precious time keeping an eye on in-queue seat assignments and waiting for better seats to emerge. That was before the small travel agency became an early TMC adopter of the ExpertFlyer application that automatically monitors assignments and alerts agents when a better seat becomes available.

ExpertFlyer for years has been a popular consumer application among frequent flyers who haunt the FlyerTalk online chat room. Following pilots with agencies including Travelbusiness and Edmonton-based Paull Travel, ExpertFlyer last month announced availability of an agent version. It integrates with the Sabre global distribution system via the Sabre Red Workspace "or through an API for larger agencies that want to integrate the app directly into their custom back-end solutions," according to the company.

Before that, Irmberg said his agency had "been looking for years for an automated system that would alert seat assignments without manual interference. We are only a \$5 million to \$6 million agency, so we can't afford expensive systems. But even the big agencies don't seem to have good systems that do that efficiently."

That led Irmberg to ExpertFlyer's consumer site, even before ExpertFlyer adapted the technology for the agency market. At that time, the application worked but because it lacked GDS integration the process required manual intervention outside the typical agent's workflow, he explained.

Now, Irmberg said the ExpertFlyer download from the Sabre Red App Centre largely is plug-and-play. "They've done a good job keeping it simple, both in terms of the program itself and the graphics," he said. As far as incorporating the technology into the agent workflow, "any-

thing that's new and has never been done before will make agents go, 'What's happening?' But once you explain it and go through it once, they see how it works."

ExpertFlyer president and co-founder Chris Lopinto said the Sabre application is free for agents to download. They are then billed every month based on the number of Seat Alerts created. Lopinto said the "fee varies based on volume" but averages around \$1 per alert.

"Since it is our back-end systems that check the seat maps for a better seat around the clock, ExpertFlyer incurs the GDS scan charges, not the agency," according to Lopinto.

Once downloaded and installed, the application is live in the Sabre workspace and "reads which PNR segments have seat assignments and which ones don't," Lopinto said. "If it's a window seat or an aisle seat—great. But let's say one segment gets a window seat and one gets a middle seat. You can set an alert for the middle seat and say that you want a window, aisle or whether or not they can get premium seats. Our back-end checks the seat maps periodically."

If a better seat is found, agents are alerted through the application in the Sabre workspace or through optional email alerts. It is then up to the agent to re-assign.

Lopinto claimed the success rate for improving seat assignments is "north of 70 percent." Meanwhile, the ExpertFlyer API enables connectivity into corporate booking tools, which the company is exploring.

Lopinto noted that agencies could upsell Seat Alerts as a premium service, or if agents already are spending time "putting a PNR in a queue and then checking it later, it's a time saver."

The latter was the case for Travelbusiness, which had manually constructed such a service.

As for charging clients, Travelbusiness has a slightly uncommon business model, as it has "eliminated the standard agent fee," said Irmberg. Instead, the firm collects 60 percent of its revenue through commissions on high-yield international tickets. In some cases, the agency has agreed with clients to mark-up fares that incorporate the agency's high-touch services.