



American Airlines joins others in offering boarding pass options via mobile phone, bypassing paper printouts. Check out our hands-on impressions of the current cell phone boarding pass system.

American Airlines customers flying out of a select group of airports, including Las Vegas McCarran Airport (LAS), Jackson Atlanta International (ATL) and Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP) will be able to receive their boarding pass as e-mail sent directly to their mobile phones. While e-tickets had mostly eliminated the need for paper tickets at the airport, customers were still required to print a pass to use for boarding a flight at the gate. American Airline and a few other air carriers had been testing a mobile phone option that would eliminate the need for paper tickets altogether, and today American has expanded its mobile boarding pass service beyond the initial 3 airports in the trial run. Customers at Chicago's O'Hare (ORD), Los Angeles (LAX) airport, and John Wayne Orange County (SNA) will keep the new service option.

We've tried the new barcode system on Continental Airlines departing from Newark Liberty Airport. Continental currently offers the Mobile Boarding Pass option on departures from 10 of their airports, including Houston, Boston, LaGuardia in New York City and Ronald Reagan National Airport in D.C. In practice, the mobile boarding pass was somewhat convenient, but we had some trouble getting our phone to hold onto the image properly. The 2D barcode was sent to our phone in an e-mail as a link. If our browser or phone refreshed itself between the time when we originally loaded the barcode and when we needed to scan it for check-in, we would lose the barcode and have to reload it. Sometimes, we got errors trying to load it again. This sort of system needs to be flawless if customers are going to gamble their flights over it.

In addition to American Airlines and Continental, Delta has also introduced a mobile boarding pass option. Delta's downloadable boarding pass is available for departures from 4 airports the airline serves, including LaGuardia, Memphis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and of course, Las Vegas McCarran, which seems to be the most popular airport for these options.

Obviously, we expect these mobile solutions to become more popular, especially as Web browsing and e-mail become the norm on mobile devices, still, we think there are a few ways in which this mobile option can be improved. Foremost, we'd be interested in seeing boarding passes that use NFC technology built into phones. NFC, or near-field communications, is a secure form of close-proximity wireless technology. It's popular abroad and currently being used for mobile banking transactions, bus and theater ticketing and other similar options. This might be a more secure and reliable option, but U.S. manufacturers have yet to jump on this emerging tech.