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Speeding up the flow

There's a new wave apparent within the aviation industry when it comes to the subject of passenger processing. It's cutting edge - and it's here to stay.

China came another step closer to automating its passenger handling processes in April.

China Southern Airlines became the first Chinese carrier to offer mobile check-in, another innovative step for the airline that sold the country's first e-ticket back in 2000 and which introduced the first common-use self-service kiosk in 2005; it also introduced the country's first on-line check-in option in 2006. Mobile check-in initially will be available at Guangzhou Baiyun on flights to Zhengzhou and is expected to be expanded to other routes. The carrier introduced check-in via SMS last September, allowing passengers to check in and select their seats via mobile phones, then pick up their boarding pass at the airport. The service just launched produces a barcoded boarding pass which is sent to the passenger's mobile phone. Air China plans to introduce the service on domestic routes leaving from Beijing shortly. It has just concluded a feasibility study and is awaiting approval from CAAC. China Eastern Airlines also is committed to expanding check-in options. "If we can't get creative with information technology, we will always be at the mercy of domestic e-travel websites," commented Chairman Liu Shaoyong.

Scandinavia: trials underway

Since April, SAS Scandinavian Airlines customers have been able to travel using only their mobile phone. This is in line with SAS's focus on offering its passengers the most uncomplicated method of travel possible. During a trial period (which is running until July), passengers will benefit from the simplicity of travelling with Scandinavian Airlines between seven airports, namely Copenhagen, Gothenburg, Helsinki, London Heathrow, Oslo, Stavanger and Stockholm.

"Currently, approximately 10% of SAS passengers check in via SMS, but our goal for 2011 is that 80% of our customers check in off-airport, which means online or via their mobile," explains Lars Sandahl Sørensen, Senior Vice President, Commercial, SAS. "It is very important for us that our customers have the smoothest and simplest travel experience possible with us. We are therefore looking forward to rolling out the service later this year, once we have evaluated the trial."

The service will be available to all passengers with mobile Internet facilities, the so-called WAP phones. Once a passenger has checked in via SMS or the SAS Mobile Portal (www.sas.mobi), all that is needed is one click to confirm the flight details and a Mobile Boarding Pass with a 2D barcode will then be displayed. The Mobile Barcoded Boarding Pass contains the flight number, seat number, departure and arrival time.

The 2D barcode can be used when registering luggage at the SAS Self Service Kiosks, as well as for security, Fast Track security and lounge access.

For the trial of mobile barcoded boarding passes (or mBCBPs), SAS is partnering with UK-based Mobiqa. Mobiqa is actually IATA's Strategic Preferred Partner for mobile boarding solutions and a supplier to a number of other Star Alliance members.

Speaking on behalf of Mobiqa, CEO Nick Rankin underlines the fact that the company has been a specialist in this business for seven years and that its products are applicable to the railway, aviation, entertainment, retail and supply chain sectors.

"We're well known amongst airline carriers when it comes to mobile technology," he confirms, pointing to the likes of Northwest, Spanair, Swiss and Qatar as current users of Mobiqa's mobile barcode optimisation technology. The decision to offer the product to SAS involves a 90 day trial, which is fairly standard practice from Mobiqa in order that the airline can test systems and procedures throughout the entire passenger flow. He admits that such an application is best suited to operations with a certain critical mass – and that it's more relevant to the business community than to the average holiday-maker. Mobiqa supplies patented mobile barcode optimisation technology so that the 2D boarding pass is delivered to each and every mobile phone.

Sounds easy - until you hear that Mobiqa has a database that stores the details of literally thousands of different models of mobile phone worldwide. "Each one is different, so that we have to tailor the product to a specific phone. A barcode on one phone won't necessarily display correctly on another manufacturer's phone. As such, we optimise the boarding pass content (airline branding, 2D barcode, itinerary details) to suit the specific model of mobile phone. Currently, we're connected to some 600 networks and we can operate in 200 countries and dependencies."

The actual message can be delivered in a variety of ways (WAP Push, WAP Link, MMS and e-mail) and Nick relates that operationally-speaking there have been no problems whatsoever. Should the worst happen, and a mobile battery fade out, then it's simply a case of reverting to the manual back-up process: a paper ticket.

"The advantages are several," he adds. "For the passenger, there's the convenience of not needing to print something out – which is environmentally friendly. For the airline, mobile boarding pass delivery is an important element in any self-service strategy. By providing passengers with *all* the required self-service tools, manual

and kiosk check-in transactions can be reduced, and substantial amounts of costs saved. As for CRM, well, there is no better way to communicate than by mobile: a new mobile boarding pass can quickly be issued to a passenger who has missed a connecting flight, for example. This means the passenger does not have to queue at the manned transfer desk.

"Finally, airports can benefit in many ways. Mobiqa's mobile boarding pass technology frees up floor space for other things; it can facilitate retail couponing in the airport environment using mobile barcodes; we can use mobile barcodes for pre-paid airport car parking; mobile barcodes can drive customers to car rental kiosks; and it can provide travellers with an integrated air/ rail ticket for their onward journey from the airport. To give you an idea of the scope of this application, in the past 12 months we've spoken to 125 airlines. All of the airlines who have trialled the concept have taken it on board."

SAS's findings

Anders Lindström is PR Director for Scandinavian Airlines and he was able to comment further on the trials.

"Service and Simplicity, which also stands for SAS, is our core motto. We aim at giving our customers a hassle-free journey that is as smooth as possible. The passenger can choose to only use the mobile for the entire travel period and the idea supports SAS's strategy regarding off-airport readiness."

Whilst SAS has not yet performed any staff surveys or customer surveys, Anders mentions that there have not been any error reports in terms of customer usage. "The passengers and staff think it is a great service," he says. "During May, SAS will follow up via customer surveys and staff feedback to find out the customer added value. From those evaluation criteria SAS will decide how to proceed."

And finally, the network: he lists seven airports but would this application benefit more from a greater number of stations?

"Yes, if SAS decides to roll it out after the trial period it will be for the entire SAS network, where it is feasible."

A French update

Meanwhile, at Nice Côte d'Azur airport, Air France, Amadeus and IER have partnered in a pilot scheme that involves a new mobile boarding pass.

Between April 16 and October 30, 2009, members of Nice airport's passenger programme Club Airport Premier (CAP) and Air France's frequent flyer programme travelling on the Nice-Paris Orly domestic route will be piloting a new boarding device: the Pass and Fly.

The project has been designed to simplify passenger recognition, the crediting of CAP points and aircraft boarding through the use of a mobile phone that is enabled with Near Field Communication. It is the first time in air travel that NFC, a short-range, wireless connectivity technology, has been used to enable mobile boarding passes.

NFC integrates wireless technology with mobile phones, allowing interaction among electronic devices. This means it enables the passenger to be identified and thus obtain a digital boarding pass when he swipes the mobile phone across a reader that is set up at the airport.

For the project, Amadeus developed the technology applications for the mobile phones, departure control system and airport readers, so that they display and share information relevant to the passenger boarding process. IER built and provided the NFC booths and readers which have been integrated with the airport's infrastructure and connected to Air France's passenger management system. In turn, the French airline provided the electronic boarding passes.

How it works

The traveller checks in through any of the channels enabled by Air France, such as Internet, mobile phone or self-service kiosk. At the airport, the traveller needs to carry a NFC-enabled mobile phone which holds his frequent flyer information. The NFC component is either integrated with the mobile phone or on a sticker that communicates with the phone.

The traveller can go through a fast lane to security inspection by swiping his mobile phone past the Pass and Fly reader. The machine duly identifies the passenger and finds the boarding pass corresponding to a flight departing from Nice within the following few hours. The digital boarding pass is then uploaded on to the mobile phone following the IATA format. Nice Airport CAP frequent flyer points are automatically credited so members of the programme no longer need to go to a separate kiosk to obtain these.

Unlike 2D barcode mobile boarding passes, NFC-enabled mobile phones can even be switched off or be out of battery power when communicating with a reader.

At security inspection, the traveller swipes the mobile phone across a second NFC reader which displays their boarding pass to the security staff without the need to display their mobile phone screen. This enables an instant check compared to the traditional manual check.

Finally, at the boarding gate, the airline staff need only to check the traveller's identification documents. A NFC reader checks the boarding pass and prints a coupon with the seat information, enabling a quick boarding of the aircraft.

NFC is based on an existing contactless technology infrastructure that is already in use on a daily basis worldwide. NFC has been implemented for payment transactions and can be used to share any data between devices, giving it a huge potential that can be deployed for many other services.

According to Agnès Henry, a spokeswoman for Nice airport, it was a little early yet to accurately gauge feedback. She did, however, confirm that the NFC system was functioning well and that customer feedback was proving very positive.