

Lost Without a Clue

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ABSTRACT

Airline staff like to refer to passengers as "self-loading cargo." Indeed, it is exactly this quality that makes selling tickets on the Web an almost perfect e-commerce application. There are no delivery problems as customers bring themselves to the aircraft and the airlines save money by getting the passengers to do all the work of selecting and paying for flights.

FULL TEXT

AIRLINE WEB SITES

Lost Without a Clue

By Robert Templer/SINGAPORE



Airline staff like to refer to passengers as “self-loading cargo.” Indeed, it is exactly this quality that makes selling tickets on the Web an almost perfect e-commerce application. There are no delivery problems as customers bring themselves to the aircraft and the airlines save money by getting the passengers to do all the work of selecting and paying for flights.

So you’d think that airlines would be keen to get you to use their Web sites. Apparently not. The experience they offer is all too often the Internet equivalent of 15 hours crushed in economy with change of flight at that inner wheel of hell known as Narita. Most airline Web sites remain clumsy and confused, unable to decide whether they are just another form of advertising or a place to buy tickets.

Remember the days when you’d stand in line, for what felt like for ever, at an airline office to book a ticket? Eventually, the airline would grudgingly and slowly sell you a ticket for three times any travel agency’s price. Well, this is more or less the model airlines have adopted for their Web sites.

To investigate the state of buying tickets on-line, I set myself a challenge. I would purchase the tickets for a journey from Singapore to Bishkek in Kirgystan on the Internet. I’d heard from a travel agent that Germany’s Lufthansa had the best services to Central Asia and though flying through Frankfurt was hardly direct, it would probably be most efficient. Now all I had to do was check Lufthansa’s site. After entering the details I got the response that there were no flights on the dates I had requested. I changed the dates and got the same answer. And again, and again until I seemed to have exhausted all possibilities. I’d only been looking for a flight for about half an hour and was already shrieking at the computer.

Finally, I broke down and called Lufthansa. It transpires that the airline doesn’t fly to Bishkek—a piece of information not offered on the carrier’s site.

Maybe booking a ticket to Bishkek was too ambitious. I tried Singapore Airlines to see if they had any special deals to London. I called



up the site to find the local home page had been replaced with an obscenity-strewn denunciation of Microsoft. Being familiar with the blue screen of death, I sympathized with the hacker, but I wasn’t inclined to send in my credit-card details.

Walter Lee, vice-president for e-commerce at SIA, says the site has been moving away from providing information to allowing passengers to access all the airline’s services. He says the site will “empower consumers,” giving them more choice and information. A worthy aim but one not yet realized by most airline sites, which are still full of public-relations nonsense. My favourite is from Air France: “Stripes are the driving force behind this new decor which has a dynamic influence and lends spaciousness to the cabin, hence the navy-blue and beige carpet laid crossways.” But very few sites let you pick your seats, find out about departure gates or make that vital choice between chicken and beef.

Shoddy translations, irritating demands for undue amounts of data, such as your name and address, that sometimes must be entered several times, weak or non-existent privacy policies and glacial databases, all seem to plague most Asian sites. It is amazing how many sites don’t recognize the need to book multiple-destination travel—I couldn’t work out how to do this on the SIA or Cathay Pacific Airways sites—or neglect basic touches, like putting a calendar next to date slots. Too often, airlines have given Web designers a free hand with graphics but neglected usability.

There is also a sense that airlines are not offering the best deals on their Web sites. United States domestic carrier Southwest Airlines has transparent pricing and, in my opinion, the best-designed Web site. British Airways and United Airlines also have good sites, and Cathay gets my award for the best Asian site. But most Asian airlines offer only their priciest flights on-line. Certainly, at Japan Airlines’ and Singapore’s sites, bargains are thin on the ground. The Web is no guarantee of transparency, a point emphasized by concerns over Orbitz.com, an airline ticket and services site founded by the five top U.S. airlines. Rivals fear the site could become a centre for collusion over prices.

The real test for airline sites is whether, after using one, you feel like an empowered consumer, able to select the information you want. Or, were you overwhelmed with that shuffling, bovine feeling you get when standing in airport lines waiting to self-load? ■

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