



innovate

INTRODUCTION

THE BTN GROUP INNOVATE 2014 THINK TANKS

The Innovate 2014 Conference for the Advancement of Business Travel offered business travel executives the opportunity to articulate priorities and recommendations about six of the biggest challenges facing corporate travel buyers and suppliers:

- Selecting and Implementing Air
- Selecting and Implementing Hotel
- Selecting and Implementing a Travel Management Company
- Travel Policy Development
- Building a Better Booking Tool
- Making the Most of Mobile Opportunities

The BTN Group worked first with its Advisory Board and then with a dedicated Steering Committee to identify the focus topics for 2014. *Business Travel News* editors then recruited a group of leading business travel buyers to participate in independent task forces that could identify specific concerns and posit new ideas for moving the practice, the tools and the objectives of business travel management into the future. Think tank sessions held during the *BTN Innovate 2014* Conference served to validate concerns and flesh out innovation concepts.

The Innovate 2014 white papers document the results of these efforts.

In focus for this paper: **BUILDING A BETTER BOOKING TOOL.**



BUILDING A BETTER BOOKING TOOL

For many years, many business travel buyers have experienced frustration in working with corporate booking tools that have lagged behind consumer booking tools in appearance and functionality and remain in many eyes cumbersome, unattractive and unable to effectively use travelers' preferences and previous activity.

TASK FORCE: Building a Better Booking Tool

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These buyers, though, have found many points of agreement in their preferred visions of the next generation of booking tools, suggesting specific improvements not only in the tools' overall functionality but also among the many steps of the travel booking process.

Leading the effort to distill and vocalize this business travel buyer demand was a task force that included six travel managers, each of whom uses a different corporate booking tool. Together, they developed a shared vision of what it would take to build a better booking tool.

The task force recommended that developers think in terms of designing not just an advanced travel booking tool but a true "traveler management system" that automates interaction with individual travelers before, during and after the trip, recognizing their flight statuses and previous trips as well as feedback from other travelers, supplier performance data and corporate travel policy restrictions.

Many business travel buyers, especially those doing business multinationally, want a system that is dynamic or reconfigurable. As those buyers generally recognize it is virtually impossible to create one tool that fulfills every possible need—particularly in this environment of rapidly changing technology and data capabilities—they recommend creating systems with platforms capable of adding in new functionality and turning off outdated systems.

Task force members reached a consensus about the desirability of enhancing booking tools' calendar functions with predictive and reactive intelligence, enabling the tools to create door-to-door booking options and full-trip itineraries once travelers input destinations, arrival times and any potential meeting times and locations.

While several previous attempts to create such calendar plug-ins for some calendar platforms have not yet succeeded due to the challenges of seamlessly integrating data, creating a more intelligent profile—a



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difficult challenge—would enable further personalization of traveler preferences. Historical data also can be used to provide predictive recommendations.

Similar to the technological experience offered by online retail giant Amazon.com, the booking tool should know travelers' prior bookings, itineraries and activities and be able to recommend similar such options or those others like them have selected.

Tools that understand individual travelers—knowing where they are based, for example—might determine which specific travel

supplier brands or even status levels to offer them.

Tools that understand where travelers are going also can provide useful information about the destination.

For those attending meetings, such tools could link

travelers to other sites that have such meeting information as the preferred car rental provider or central billed card for ground transportation or whether the hotel's meeting rate is loaded in global distribution systems or is part of a dedicated room block.

At the same time, a traveler management system should address travel buyer concerns about fulfillment that are unseen by travelers, such as making sure that their banks of unused tickets get used first. Today those transactions come with agency fees for making changes. Automating those transactions could eliminate those charges.

The work of the task force provided a framework for two think tank discussions held during the Innovate conference.

What is missing from online booking tools today, according to the task force, is:

- The ability to recognize the users and their footprints and to provide options that work with their travel patterns.
- The ability to provide visibility of those attending meetings.
- The ability to help direct novice travelers to preferred vendors and provide other guidance.

Furthering the task force's vision of a traveler management system, think tank attendees suggested that it should integrate traveler feedback into searches including and beyond air, hotel and car rental and that a better system would make those searches faster. They also said such a system should maximize, but not necessarily exclusively provide, touchless transactions.

Pre-Trip Functionality

In the planning phase of travel, attendees said they would like the system to ask travelers if they really need to take a particular trip and to provide such alternative suggestions as remote conferencing. They said they would like to have device-to-device sharing of planning information. Think tank participants also suggested that systems could go beyond calendar integration to include email scraping. They said they would like to see new systems provide travelers with a personal scorecard that contains their year-to-date travel expenses versus a budget, and similar functionality for buyers that would automate approval and provide an ongoing

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measure of travel expenses versus company-wide and departmental budgets.

At the top of the list of search capabilities for future tools, think tank participants put providing travelers with predictive and relevant door-to-door recommendations drawn from all available content, including all ground transportation and parking options as well as air, car and hotel inventory. Those recommendations to travelers should come with company and industry benchmarks for specific services.

Buyer attendees' collective booking-tool wish list also included the ability to segment travelers and provide targeted messaging, to provide safety and policy alerts and to restrict booking of a particular flight if too many senior executives try to buy tickets.

Participants said travelers using traveler management systems searching for fares and

rates should have access to peer and social reviews. Buyer participants also said such systems during this stage of the booking process should recognize the availability of

unused tickets for air and rail so that they can be applied where appropriate, as well as to suggest when and where to shift travel to avoid sold-out situations. Additionally, participants discussed the need to streamline search functionality to reduce unnecessary clicks and keystrokes as well as to develop some type of interactive agent—a smarter, travel-specific version of Apple's Siri to expedite the search process.

Think tank members also said new tools should provide buyers with the ability to preference suppliers with which their organizations hold negotiated agreements and to take into consideration loyalty program membership. New tools also could help buyers in the search phase by analyzing which options are being offered and which are being taken.

The Booking Stage

For the actual booking phase of the process, participants agreed that travelers want tools that are “fun” and “sexy” in how they appear, with streamlined, simple processes that allow booking with only a few clicks. Such tools could employ integrated peer and social reviews, flight performance data, gamification techniques and alerts for missing segments or travel documents, as well as verifying status, seat check, rental car or room type. They also called for traveler management tools that clearly present all rules, restrictions and terms and provide a crisp travel summary.

Participants also envisioned the tools providing quality control procedures, anticipating problematic issues and continuing to look for savings opportunities after booking. They also want booking tools that integrate travel with meetings, with the capability to book room blocks.

During The Trip

Travelers during the course of the trip need support when flight, hotel and other changes are required, and think tank participants indicated that a traveler management system should be able to provide just that, including

“Fun” and “sexy” looking tools are what travelers want, along with simple processes for booking with only a few clicks.

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relevant alerts and rebooking recommendations that travelers can quickly accept or decline in the case of irregular operations.

Additionally, participants wanted to see more comprehensive pre-trip and during-the-trip messaging, including incorporating beacon technology that can provide travelers with flight status and gate information, safety alerts and relevant, location-based offers involving dining, health and wellness and other options.

Meanwhile, booking tool providers should alert travelers to commonalities with colleagues' itineraries and opportunities to share rides or other experiences and provide travelers with a simple survey to indicate in real time when there are travel supplier service issues, according to participants. Travelers also should be allowed to share through the tool information about experiences on the ground and other concerns and help buyers analyze that feedback.

For buyers, traveler tracking is one of the most critical requirements during the travel experience. Buyers also want new tools that provide confirmation of rebookings and verification that they are within policy. The tools also should capture and integrate any changes into the original passenger name record.

Participants also put high on the list the need for new tools to work on all devices.

Post-Trip And Reporting

For the reporting phase of the booking process, participants agreed overwhelmingly that booking data should be meshed with

expense and other tools, as well as reports on service quality, savings and safety. Participants also said the systems should flag out-of-policy bookings and reconcile unused tickets at termination.

Topping off the reporting wish list is the integration of booking and expense data which reflects both personal as well as company performance that ideally the traveler and travel manager should receive in real time. Additionally, traveler management systems should provide travelers and travel buyers with compliance and exception reports (referred to by one participant as "shamification").

Think tank participants said the features of their current tools that should be incorporated into the next generation of booking tools include single-sign-on functionality, last-room-availability rate assurance, nonrefundable ticket-exchange capabilities, expense integration, an uncluttered easy-to-use interface and the ability to change an outbound flight without canceling the booking.

The effort by corporate travel buyers and other Innovate attendees to identify current online booking system pain points and to describe visions of a more perfect tool for booking corporate travel produced a remarkable amount of consensus. The common vision that they articulated is of a calendar-initiated, end-to-end solution that is intuitive, predictive and personalized to provide more targeted searches that yield fewer but better choices and which is built on a platform that can support all devices and allow travelers and buyers to plug in and replace suppliers of all travel-related content, technology and services. ■

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