

# DIY travel



Airline passengers are taking check-in and boarding into their own hands, Lucy Siebert reports.

**W**hether you love them or hate them, most airline passengers are addicted to their mobile phones and airlines have been quick to jump at the chance to leverage this technology addiction into a potential cost-saving.

While there have been many advances in self-service check-in technology in the past five years, 2008 has seen mobile check-in really arriving on the scene with airlines such as Lufthansa, bmi and Northwest unveiling various trials and roll-outs of the technology during the summer.

This is expected to grow quickly, with SITA forecasting that by next year 76% of airlines will offer mobile check-in.

SITA's director of portfolio marketing, Dominique El Bez, believes that while kiosks and the web will remain the most popular channels, mobile will play an important role in the future. "With more than 90% of passengers carrying a mobile phone (among frequent fliers it is 98%), harnessing the potential of mobile technologies is an obvious step forward."

IATA's project manager, common-use self-service, Paul Behan, has a slightly different view, believing mobile check-in will become the number one channel for passenger processing in the future. "Given that the majority of airline

passengers have mobile phones, it is difficult to see how it won't become the channel of choice," says Behan.

Lufthansa is currently running a pilot test of mobile technology across its domestic network this summer, whereby travellers with Internet-enabled mobile phones to be sent an electronic boarding pass via email or SMS. Passengers travelling with only hand baggage can then proceed straight to the security checkpoint and to the gate where the mobile boarding pass is read by a scanner.

Similarly bmi has introduced paperless boarding on some of its UK services. "This is a significant step forward and will offer customers the opportunity to bypass check-in processes at the airport. Customers who check in online can have a boarding pass delivered straight to their mobile phone allowing them to proceed straight to security or to bmi's quick bag drop stations if they have luggage to check-in," says Peter Spencer, managing director of bmi.

But its not just in the area of mobile check-in that things are moving fast – the entire self-service check-in offering is developing at a rapid pace, allowing travellers more choice, flexibility and control. In fact, the technologies are developing at such a pace that within a few years the majority of travellers' first

contact with airline staff will be once they have already boarded the aircraft, having completely managed their own check-in and boarding.

Today passengers want to be empowered to manage their own journey, with the SITA 2007 Passenger Self-Service Survey showing that over 60% of travellers already use self-service check-in when they know it is available.

But even when the technology is available, passengers need to be comfortable with the technology. This is something that KLM, a leader in self-service technology, has learnt since deploying dedicated self-service check-in kiosks seven years ago.

Cees de Vos, director of system service at KLM explains: "KLM started in 2001 on a very small scale, as the kiosks were positioned near the wall, not hampering the passenger flow – resulting in next to no usage of the kiosks. Then 10 kiosks were placed next to the conventional check-in counters with floor-walkers for hand luggage only, resulting in usage of 6%. The real change came when 50% of check in capacity was replaced by 40 kiosks and baggage drop counters. Floorwalkers were introduced to invite, motivate and support passengers. Today 74% of KLM passengers



Picture courtesy of BagDrop.

departing from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol use self-service check-in, either via the Internet or kiosks.”

While KLM has focussed its energy on dedicated kiosks at its Schiphol hub, it also utilises a combination of dedicated and CUSS (Common User Self Service) kiosks at other gateways.

SITA first began to deploy CUSS kiosks in 2005 and their popularity is going from strength to strength. Today around the world 45% of kiosks are CUSS and 55% dedicated.

Despite the majority of passengers being keen to manage their own journey, some do not want – or are not empowered – to do so. According to SITA, 21% of passengers do not want to check in online and 16% do not want to use kiosks.

British Airways’ innovation manager for ba.com, Hazel Hughes, says the airline is very aware of these discrepancies. “For passengers travelling out of the UK, the average figure for self-service check-in is 80% whereas in Johannesburg it is just 15%,” she says.

One common issue hampering all self-service check-in initiatives has been baggage.

“SITA’s 2007 passenger self-service survey found that baggage was the number one reason people didn’t use

self-service check-in. It is fundamental that airports, airlines and ground handlers adjust their infrastructure and processes to offer effective baggage treatment in a self-service world, whether on or off-airport,” says El Bez.

To address baggage concerns there are a number of new baggage solutions in development. CUSS kiosks are constantly evolving towards the self-printing of bag tags and new bag drop solutions along with integrated RFID technology and there are other new systems, such as BagDrop systems BV which offer alternatives.

These types of systems also increase the possibilities for off-site check-in.

BA’s Hughes says: “We are already seeing CUSS kiosks being introduced into some hotel chains in the US and these usually combine hotel check-out functionality with airline check-in.”

New Orleans is one such airport where a major remote check-in project is currently underway, allowing passengers to check in their bags and complete airline check-in processing at downtown locations.

And while we would all like to work in environments where there are never snowstorms, security scares or baggage handling breakdowns, these are simply facts of the air transport industry. But SITA believes that self-

service check-in options could actually provide an opportunity to manage these types of situations more efficiently. According to SITA, 79% of passengers would register for SMS notification services to update them on problems, 63% would use transfer kiosks and 49% would use lost baggage declaration kiosks

NCR, a leader in the development and deployment of self-service kiosks around the world, points out that these types of disruption management solutions are at an advanced stage in some markets. NCR’s travel expert, Warwick Lawson-Syer says: “Today passengers can be automatically rebooked onto a new flight and pick up boarding passes from an in-airport kiosk. If desired, vouchers can also be dispensed which passengers can use in local restaurants when they are likely to be delayed a long time.”

With these types of initiatives involving so many stakeholders, the uptake and ultimate success of self-service will rely on partnerships. As Behan concludes: “The real issue is for airports and airlines to work together to ensure each party sees a value in the investment and a benefit to their respective businesses, to make the passenger feel that the level of service has been improved.”

