What do travel agents really need from a global distribution system today?

Travelport's GDS Usability Study

About this paper

A study conducted in parallel to the launch of a new era in travel agency technology

With the unprecedented challenges agencies are facing today, Travelport recognises that it is time for dramatic change in travel agency technology. A groundbreaking platform is needed that enables travel agents to deliver the best traveller experiences and the highest levels of customer service — an increasingly tall order in today's extremely competitive environment.

In addition to consistently monitoring global travel, technology and consumer trends, Travelport keeps a solid pulse on the working habits of travel agents, including how they use their GDS and related technologies. As one of the staunchest travel agency advocates in history, Travelport has driven global distribution system (GDS) and travel agency technology developments for 35 years, delivering advances that have transformed the ways travel is distributed, bought and sold. Travelport is once again moving the industry forward with an innovative desktop selling and merchandising platform for agencies.

This paper explains Travelport's approach to its groundbreaking desktop solution, highlighting how the results of customer collaboration through an extensive usability study resulted in the development of the Travelport Universal Desktop™ – an innovative booking solution that unifies selling and merchandising in a single, powerful platform and provides access to a world of multisource content.

Foreword

What is the role of the global distribution system in today's travel agencies?

Even with the dramatic expansion of the Internet and the proliferation of new sources offering bookable travel content, GDSs are still the primary, most comprehensive and reliable platform for travel agencies and their corporate clients to access, shop and book travel. It is also through GDSs and their rich portfolios of travel planning and management tools that agencies and corporations reconcile and manage daily travel business. Due to their breadth, scope and supplier relationships, GDSs are also fundamental to the supply of travel products to retailers in the online channel.

Just how heavily do travel agencies rely on these systems?

GDS transactions account for USD$268 billion in global travel sales, with an average of USD$243 per transaction[1]. More than one billion transactions are carried out annually using GDSs, and it is estimated that nearly 500,000 travel agencies globally use a GDS to conduct business every day[1]. To illustrate what it takes to support this enormous volume of travel business, Travelport's global data processing centre alone, which powers travel transactions on a global scale, is among the largest non-military data facilities in the world.

Travel agents and their customers are at the heart of GDS advancement

To enable travel agencies to remain competitive and grow in a vastly changing business environment, the fundamental architecture of the GDS has given way to open systems architecture and graphical user interfaces (GUI) for accessing, planning and booking travel, with each of these industry-changing advances led by Travelport.

Travelport was first among GDS providers to move to 100 percent server-based technology for airfare shopping and pricing, resulting in the delivery of more fares faster and more up-to-the-minute availability to travel agents through the GDS. Travelport also brought graphical user interfaces (GUI) to the travel agent's desktop for shopping and booking hotels and car rentals. This particular evolution has allowed novice agents to quickly and intuitively learn to navigate the GDS. But the advent of GUI applications has also been met with reluctance by highly experienced agents for whom traditional GDS 'green screens,' native entries and cryptic codes have long served them as a fluent second language. This traditional approach to working was a key area of focus in Travelport's usability study and is referred to as the 'command line method.'

What are the travel agency's biggest challenges today?

Facing growing competition from major travel web sites and travel supplier consumer-direct marketing, traditional agencies are under intense pressure to expand profit margins and lower operating costs. Travellers are more demanding than ever, and travel suppliers are distributing their products through an increasing number of booking channels. As a result, travel agents are tapping into multiple web sites and other sources, and working across multiple platforms to find more options for travellers. Travelport research has shown that travel agents query an average of 17 different web sites or information sources prior to each booking.

Today's agencies truly find themselves between a rock and a hard place. While it is necessary to reach out across the expanse for more options and pricing for customers today, this time-consuming process negatively impacts agent productivity, efficiency and service, and limits revenue opportunities. Using multiple platforms makes it difficult for agents to finalise trips, secure optional services and travel documents, and control internal processes and service quality. Plus, it's often impossible for agents and their customers to benefit from inclusive itineraries containing all trip segments.

Travelport's usability study provides an insider's look at some of the critical steps taken to find new ways to help travel agencies excel at customer service, improve efficiency and workflows, and become more profitable.

The GDS of the future

Building on past successes, Travelport began exploring an all-new frontier in travel agency technology – a new GDS desktop solution nestled within a powerful, intuitive and graphical environment. This new application went into development and was rigorously tested by travel

agents at multiple junctures through a serious of focus groups. Over time – beginning with the early conceptual phases and all the way through to the beta version – the needs, desires and working habits of travel agents around the globe played a pivotal role in the development of the Travelport Universal Desktop.

The findings in this white paper reveal travel agent reactions from seeing the initial concepts to actually using the new system, which evolved over time based on input gleaned from focus groups.

What about strong attachments to the command line method?

During one-on-one study sessions with travel agents, Travelport observed dozens of agents highly proficient in the command line method of conducting business through the GDS (green screens, native GDS entries, cryptic codes). For many agents, mastering these commands was a lengthy process, often taking years of training and repetition – a difficult and intimidating method for novice users. But for those who learned, the method is still king. These agents are highly competent at finding the information they need through the GDS.

Nevertheless, times are changing and Travelport is strongly encouraging agents at all levels of proficiency to recognise and consider how new GUI applications are the best and fastest way to realise exemplary customer service and higher profitability. A more intuitive system would not only reduce the time required to train new agents, but would also dramatically improve the user experience for agents at all levels of proficiency. Collapsing and expanding panels, sorting and filtering options, click-and-drag selections – all give users a lot more control of content and workflows, and substantially increase speed and productivity.

About the study and the methods used

Through this usability study, Travelport sought in-depth input in three key areas:

1. How travel agents currently use their GDS – their habits, wants, needs and preferences
2. How the agent's GDS experience could be improved
3. Agent reactions to the designs of Travelport's graphical user interface (GUI) desktop concept

Completely focused on travel agent working habits and use of the GDS

In this comprehensive study, focus groups were conducted with travel agents across the globe. In each round of focus groups, 80 travel agency professionals were interviewed in one-on-one sessions, either on location or remotely via Internet screen-sharing technology. Remote sessions involved Travelport development partners with locations in different regions, including South Africa, Canada, Australia, the UK and various U.S. cities. Each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes.

The study comprised an interesting cross-section of travel agency participants, with notable differences from region to region in their particular fashion of GDS usage. This valuable sampling created a vast, ideal pool of participants for Travelport to design a truly global solution with strong relevance at the local market level.

Recording of accurate and comprehensive responses

Human responses gathered to measure the likeability and usability of existing or new software are paramount to any research but difficult to measure. Subjective experiences of each user can only be anecdotally recorded through interviewing participants and gaining an understanding of their reactions. To achieve comprehensive, accurate results, Travelport used TechSmith's Morae Usability Software, a specialised solution that tracks and records feedback and usage habits.

Close monitoring of the user experience

Travelport observed how study participants interact with their GDS, including not just straightforward usability factors, such as ease of use, but also how the GDS aligns with each user's working life – including taking client phone calls, sending and receiving e-mails, working travel requests, booking and modifying existing reservations, and engaging in face-to-face interactions with customers, staff and service providers. Areas probed with each user included:

1. How do you currently work?
2. How does your working environment operate?
3. What are the tools you use and what makes them useful?
4. What's missing from your current GDS offerings?
5. What can Travelport offer to help you become more efficient and profitable?

Travelport then showed users some images of the early wireframes (rough sketches) of Travelport's new graphical user interface (GUI) desktop application, and asked them to talk through how they would use the screens to complete common tasks.

6. Is the new interface easy to understand?
7. More importantly, do you *want* to use the new interface?

The study broadened Travelport's understanding of how aspects of the new GUI application are perceived in different countries, cultures and types of travel agencies, including leisure, corporate and a mix of agency business orientations. After analysing the results of these collaborative focus groups, a list of change recommendations was created promising the greatest impact on improving the usability of the new desktop application. This approach enabled Travelport to generate concrete, actionable results in addressing capabilities, issues and trends uncovered in the study. Ultimately, Travelport evolved the GUI application into a more powerful, efficient and productivity-oriented interface exclusively designed for today's travel agencies.

What results were gleaned from the study?

Creating specialised software naturally begins with specialised customer requirements. Travelport's usability study and testing of initial and ongoing software designs provided critical insights into how travel agency staff approach work through the GDS, and how they reacted to a new, revolutionary point-and-click interface.

In a nut shell…

Agents want:

- A fast input method
- To perform complicated searches
- To become more efficient and with greater expertise
- To use their travel knowledge in the travel selection process
- To service customers faster so they can be more productive

Agents are:

- Comfortable with GUI applications (in the United States and Australia more than in the UK) and are able to use the design with no training
- Open to an easier, intuitive GUI system for more complicated or rarely performed tasks, but not necessarily for the basic flight entry
- Concerned about vulnerability to change
- Uncertain of their future and concerned about job security
- Concerned that a new platform would slow them down

Managers and travel agents alike value opportunities to provide better customer service to clients.

One New York-based agent said:

"More information in one place and the workflow will help our agents. We are definitely looking for a solution like this."

In Glasgow, one agent commented on the all-in-one package:

"We want one system that can do everything."

The above sentiment was echoed by an Italian agent who neatly summarized the advantages he experienced:

"If I save time looking for things, I have more time to make bookings and then earn more. In order to earn, we have to save time."

Additional insights and input included the following:

➢ Across all participants, the study revealed that most users are familiar with GUI input fields and able to use the application to make common bookings with no training.

➢ Study participants were very receptive to the GUI desktop application compared to the cryptic command line method. Ease-of-use was mentioned as an advantage, particularly for new users, and experienced users found the GDS simple to re-learn through the interface.

➢ Many proficient agents in early focus groups expressed doubts about their years of training in the command line method being trivialised by this new, easy-to-use platform, however they quickly adapted to the new interface, recognising the value of the GUI application over the command line method.

   "It kind of brings everything into one system, doesn't it? That's good!"

➢ Some participants appreciated the intuitiveness, and others felt threatened by the fact that it seemed 'anyone could use the system.'

➢ Study participants in the United States and Australia seemed more familiar with GUI applications and didn't correlate GUI with 'novice' as much as travel agents in the UK.

➢ One of the most common reactions among UK agents was that the GUI application reminded them of a prominent Web-based travel site. Only one individual made this comment during a second round of focus groups, in the positive context of being familiar and easy to use.

> ➤ Feedback showed that learning the new interface would be simple, especially for new travel agent recruits. This is a key area of value to the travel agency since training overhead is high, and it costs money to get a fully trained agent in front of customers. One user said:

> *"[The test version of the new GUI GDS is] good for new recruits because we usually require five years of GDS training, and now that wouldn't be needed."*

How will Travelport Universal Desktop change the travel agent's experience?

The command line method will be available through Travelport's new desktop system. It will allow the use of up to four different windows on the travel agent's screen. Each window can be used for a different function – perhaps one for booking hotel rooms, another for checking flight availability and another for checking the queues. Feedback from study participants regarding this aspect was positive, with agents reporting an appreciation of the multi-tasking function and the ability to display more than a single set of data.

But what can a GUI application do that a cryptic command line system cannot?

There are many highly effective functions that are now standard in many graphical interfaces, including Web sites, but they're absent from the cryptic command line method. For example, adding an auto-look-up search function speeds up data entry and helps avoid spelling or syntax errors. As users start searching hotels in Paris, typing 'p' and 'a' displays a drop-down box of all locations beginning with 'pa.' The user can keep typing the city name or select the correct name from the list. Similarly, there are hover hints, which allow users to hover the cursor over a button or data element, and receive an explanation of what that item is or does. This can help reduce time spent querying colleagues or consulting help guides, and improve confidence in the system.

Travelport Universal Desktop, can improve the travel agent's user experience and the entire travel agency's ability to compete in critical (or significant) and wide-ranging ways.

Making the interface look right to travel agents

Participants found Travelport Universal Desktop to be polished and modern; however, the study went through two phases in presenting differing graphical elements. An original sky blue-toned interface received positive comments but was generally deemed too 'light' and too similar to a consumer application or Web site. Travelport's graphic design team redesigned key areas of the interface and replaced the sky blue coloration with a light grey. This new, serious look received positive feedback, drawing comments like professional, modern, detailed and informative.

The feel of the application — it's all about performance and customer service

Speed: Since time is money, most study participants highlighted the need to enter simple, common search entries, very quickly. Agents need to be proficient in navigating the GDS to produce answers for customers as quickly as possible. Travelport tested a new 'speed entry' concept for searching based on these insights, which was well received by study participants.

Presentation: Another key factor for agents is how availability search results are presented on the screen. Travelport's previous research of agent preferences found this vital, with agents eager to clearly see as many results as possible. Availability search results shown to study participants through the new application made positive impressions, with users commenting on the easy-to-read layout. They commented that this would give them more information faster, a major advantage in markets and circumstances where speed is essential.

Power tabbing: Travelport Universal Desktop's multi-tab capability tested very positively across all participants because it helps satisfy the agent's need to quickly and easily move between multiple tasks, bookings and client relationships.

A versatile trip cart: A feature not found in existing GDSs but which is offered through Travelport's new Universal Desktop is a 'trip cart.' This allows the travel agent to collate travel options into a single area on screen and later compare those selections and prices. This is convenient for agents and their customers, and can serve as a trip quote before the traveller is ready to book. An agent can also save the work for easy recall when it's time. The overwhelming number of study participants interviewed agreed this feature improved their natural workflows.

Ever-present customer profiles: Traveller profiles are a timesaving technique for common travel agent tasks, allowing agents to quickly load a pre-set selection of customer preferences. On Travelport's test Universal Desktop, this capability was shown as an easily accessible feature that could be seen on-screen at all times. Again, users responded positively, with comments highlighting that this was a highly convenient addition to the interface.

Sticky notes: While observing the day-to-day work processes of so many travel agents, Travelport's usability experts observed how often agents jot things down, either on sticky notes, a scrap of paper or in a bound notebook – and dig to find them later. Based on that observation, a Notes Tool was added to the interface screen, enabling agents to enter information about a specific booking directly into the application and instantly retrieve it when needed.

A panel for accessing frequently used activities: An activity panel within Travelport's new GUI application is always available so agents can continue to search for travel content and information without losing a booking. The panel keeps key functions instantly available, including customer profiles, the trip cart, the notes tool and more, making agents more productive, efficient and customer service-oriented.

Examples of innovative functions borne out of the focus groups

Creating better solutions for travel agency workflows was the main reason Travelport undertook this study. Through the focus groups, Travelport observed obstacles and workarounds agents deal with everyday. This enabled Travelport to design around efficiency, productivity, customer service, information integration, easy access, cost reductions and new opportunities for profitability.

In response to travel agent comments and requests received over the course of testing, Travelport created two functions within the new application software that would allow experienced travel agents to apply their own expertise to each travel booking and improve both speed and reach into travel content. These include the Price Mixer and Powerline functions.

Price Mixer

Price Mixer provides the ability for an Agent to pick one or more outbound options and one or more return options on the air/rail shop results display and add them to a new **price mixer** display. It may be a combination of GDS air, Airlines Content Hub (ACH) and Rail Content Hub (RCH) segments. Once selections are placed in the price mixer, the Agent can choose various trip combinations to Price.

This capability was created in direct response to ease of use. Many study participants actually found the GUI application too simplistic in shopping fares, offering little control over the exact details for each booking. Price Mixer was created to allow agents to access fares not offered through original search results, thereby introducing the advantages of the agent's specialist knowledge of fares and routes.

Feedback from the Price Mixer testing phase was very positive, with one respondent calling it the 'highlight' of the application. Another commented:

"Mixing classes is a defining aspect of a travel agent's expertise. I would spend most of my time using the Mixer, because corporate travel bookings need to specify these things."

The control gained with Price Mixer was appreciated, with a high number of agents reporting that it offered the power and control of a cryptic interface but through a GUI system:

"Price Mixer is more up my alley… I pick the best airlines and times. Put in what you want and you get all the results, not what should be or might be the best."

Powerline

Powerline provides quick search capabilities from any point within a workflow. Access to ticket information, profile data, traveller records, or even Flight Status is immediately available, empowering the agents with all the information they need to keep their travellers well-informed. Powerline's quick search capabilities enable agents to provide improved customer service levels and maximise their customers' experience.

With the Powerline function, Travelport responded to travel agents' need for speed. It was created as a method of replicating – yet evolving – the fast, direct nature of the traditional command line method. It gives the agent a speedy and simple way to request availability data, but with the added benefits of a GUI application, including the ability to sort, filter and arrange results, quickly and without hassle. As its name implies, the main purpose of Powerline is speed, and as such it is instantly accessible throughout the application, no matter where an agent is working in the GDS.

Responding to how agents could find the closest airports, one focus group participant said:

"I would just Powerline it."

Indeed.

What does it all mean for travel agents?

There's never been anything that fundamentally changed the way travel agents work – until now

In the broad realm of travel agency information and management systems, the cryptic command line method is rightfully challenged by innovative GUI technology designed for today's profit- and service-driven travel agencies. The benefits of using a GUI application became clear through rigorous testing phases. As this paper and study findings illustrate, a thoughtfully designed GUI application for the GDS, correctly researched, tested and developed, offers travel agents infinitely more control, speed and ease-of-use. Most important, it gives agents the tools they need to excel in customer service. It has been confirmed that Travelport's new Universal Desktop application allows agents to dedicate more attention to customers and to fulfilling customer requirements. Managers in particular were impressed by the ease of use and time savings in training, as well as the advanced integration of information, including all required back-end data.

The wow factors

Travelport Universal Desktop doesn't simply add a graphical layer to an existing GDS. The entire application has been designed to take travel agents into the next era in travel agency technology. This groundbreaking change in applications will enable agents to deliver the type and level of customer service travellers are demanding today, providing access to multisource travel content while combining selling and merchandising into a single platform. Through enhanced workflow control and content integration, agents will become more productive, business processes will become more efficient, training costs will shrink and new revenue opportunities will be realised.

Agencies of all sizes and complexity, in any region of the world, will be able to configure the desktop based on customer service requirements, local market needs, and productivity and revenue goals.

Any travel agent ready to be wowed by Universal Desktop's combination of simplicity and power is encouraged to contact Travelport for a product demonstration.

The beginning of a journey ...

This is a long term investment for Travelport to join up the travel supply chain. Joining suppliers to agents - agents to leisure and corporate customers.

Contact Travelport to learn more

For more information about Travelport Universal Desktop and the advantages it can deliver to your staff and business, please contact your Travelport account representative or request a call from a Travelport representative via our global Web site: www.travelport.com/contact.aspx

You can also visit the Universal Desktop website at www.travelportuniversaldesktop.com

Footnote

1. Quinby, Douglas (2009). *The Role and Value of the Global Distribution Systems in Travel Distribution*. Figures based on 2008 statistics. PhoCusWright.