

Ready to Rail: Smart solutions for superior service

Aging infrastructure, outmoded, inflexible reservation and distribution systems, increasingly demanding passengers — these are tough times for Europe's rail operators. What's more, they're about to get tougher. As the continent's transport markets move toward full deregulation, more agile new entrants are rapidly invading the rail operators' traditional turf: Among them are newly launching rail companies plus the low-cost airlines that have already persuaded so many travelers to abandon the train for the plane.

Threatened with such competitors in their home markets — outsiders will soon be permitted to conduct train journeys between domestic destinations — plus new opportunities to provide new cross border services, rail operators simply cannot afford to continue with business as usual. They urgently require new systems and services that enable them to compete, fight back and win.

Smart operators are fighting back — and with the airlines' own weapons. Armed with the same combination of adaptive, easy-to-use and innovative technologies that have made the low-cost flight providers so successful, leading rail companies are rising to the twin challenges of better customer management and increased revenue generation. They are learning to leverage managed reservation and distribution services to help achieve competitive advantage. And thanks to the benefits of the shared services and access to industry standards that such outsourcing delivers, they can focus on maximizing three key outcomes:

1. Know your customers

Leading players use sophisticated analytics to identify and retain loyal customer segments, and to help them target (and retain) the frequent travelers who are also the most profitable. They incorporate rich, detailed customer profiles and booking histories into centralized marketing and customer relationship management platforms that deliver such tailored passenger offerings as specific seating zones, unique seat attributes, or access to power outlets and tables. Even the high-speed operators recognize that they cannot beat the airlines on speed but — thanks to their technology platforms — they can deliver differentiated environments. These environments can transform the tedium of long train rides to productive travel time: Quiet zones for those who prefer to read, sleep or work, for example, or interactive social environments with in-seat games and food service for families.

2. Connect with customers

Today's customers expect swift, safe, enjoyable journeys they can access at their convenience. So, go-ahead operators enable customers to plan journeys and purchase tickets online, for themselves, via websites, kiosks or, as more and more prefer, via mobile devices. Forward thinking Navitaire Rail clients have also developed Smartwatch applications to guide customers to the correct rail platform, and to alert passengers to service announcements. In addition, because failure to communicate tops the list of train traveler complaints, leading players equip themselves with technologies that support a superior customer experience throughout the journey. On-board conductors with tablets and other mobile devices that read ticket barcodes (paper-based or on screen) can change a customer's environment on request, for example. And if trains are delayed or canceled, rail staff (on-board or in a station) can re-book passengers quickly and efficiently.

3. Help increase revenues with ancillary services

Leading-edge technologies also allow forward-thinking operators to help generate substantial incremental revenues by offering customers a multitude of ancillary services — from travel insurance to merchandise to onboard services and amenities such as Wi-Fi, meals and entertainment — via self-service channels and using multiple means of payment. And some have been imaginative indeed in seeking to make the most of customer demand. One operator optimizes off-peak train utilization by offering travelers a unique rolling discotheque or concert experience with live music and performances, dancing and DJs or other entertainment on-board.

Managed services for reservations and distribution offer many additional, revenue-enhancing benefits. Navitaire's advanced, flexible solutions help rail companies take on and overcome many of the challenges that exist today, and free rail company IT staff to focus on creating customized elements to engage with customers. They give rail companies expanded options to connect with partners to offer intermodal travel to customers, and engage in alliances or codeshare arrangements. They can also connect more easily with global travel distributors, inventory systems and other external partners using industry standards and advanced, flexible technologies. Fares and schedules can be distributed to agencies and other travel partners to attract and serve corporate travelers by offering a full range of fares and tailored discounts.

And the advantages of managed services extend to behind-the-scenes goals for progressive rail companies as well. On-demand, real-time access to the critical operational data and metrics that enable faster and more efficient decision-making. And they can scale quickly and efficiently as need arises and in response to the demands of their growth strategy — perhaps the most significant benefit of all in today's increasingly competitive travel markets.