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TMCs Deploying FlightStats Alerts To Mitigate Interruptions

By Jay Boehmer

MARCH 30, 2009 -- A growing number of travel management companies are adopting FlightStats' At-Risk Monitoring tool, which alerts agents to traveler itineraries that face cancellations, missed connections or other travel interruptions.

While flight alerts that warn travelers of such problems via text message have become widespread, the At-Risk Monitoring service—employed by such agencies as Ovation Travel, Travel Leaders, Travel Solutions and Balboa Travel, among others—goes a step further by alerting agents to problems and prompting them to remedy travel disruptions, in some cases before travelers even know they face an issue.

"It doesn't matter that we can push a message to the traveler," said Meara McLaughlin, FlightStats vice president of business development. "That's a nice thing to have, but the message doesn't change your outcome. It doesn't get you where you need to go in the face of the cancellation."

Travel Solutions CEO Tammy Troilo-Krings said the agency has adopted the system on behalf of most of its clients as part of a suite of homegrown and purchased offerings.

The agency monitors passenger name records with the help of FlightStats and ranks in-progress itineraries red, yellow or green based on the likelihood of a missed connection, cancellation or other travel disruption. "Anything that falls into the yellow, we start to take a look at," Troilo-Krings said. "If they're already in red, we immediately jump on those and start reaccommodating folks."

Troilo-Krings said the agency alerts the traveler that their flight has been delayed or canceled, with a follow-up alert detailing the agency's action on the itinerary. "Perhaps we've secured another flight or made a hotel reservation," she said.

Troilo-Krings said the agency has implemented a dedicated desk to monitor the system around the clock. "The people who are handling fulfillment and electronic booking back up that desk," she said, "so if we do have a situation like we did a few weeks ago where the entire Eastern Seaboard was collapsing because of weather, then we can reallocate resources very, very quickly."

Ovation Travel executive vice president Michael Steiner said the agency started using the service last year on behalf of a handful of clients, "then rolled it out to the majority of our clients in 2009" as part of the agency's standard offering.

In some cases, Steiner said, travelers will be in mid-air unaware of a looming missed connection or cancellation on their next leg. "By the time they land, they're getting an e-mail or a phone call from us with what we've been able to do for them," he said.

Balboa Travel adopted At-Risk Monitoring in the past year as an additional service to clients. In the case of a missed connection, said vice president of corporate travel solutions John Cruse, the system helps to push their clients to the front of the line in being reaccommodated by airlines. "In a lot of cases, the airlines will go in and automatically reaccommodate things," Cruse said. "This gives you the opportunity to go in before they zero out flights in some cases."

Cruse noted that some minor glitches might occur, if, for example, an airline cancels a flight only to reinstate it, "which has caused agents to prematurely rebook travelers with new itineraries." However, Cruse said those situations are "rare" and largely due to when "the wrong information gets pushed out by the carrier or the airport."

FlightStats' McLaughlin said a couple of mega agencies also are in the midst of exploring the offering, which usually comes at a cost of "a couple extra dollars per passenger name record," she said.