Beyond Viewdata

If you had taken the time to stroll around the technology stands at the World Travel Market in November 1995, there was one item of new computer technology you wouldn't have come across, that is, a replacement for viewdata that is used by UK travel agents for booking travel products on-line. This is quite surprising, given the resounding chorus so often heard that viewdata was old and outmoded. I believe all the building blocks that will make up its replacement have just fallen into place in the last year and it now only requires some significant players in the travel and communications industries to start the ball rolling.

** by Paul Richer*
Genesys

But why replace viewdata at all? After all, it has served the UK travel industry admirably, hasn't it? You can book with over 160 principals, most offering real-time links to their reservation systems for last room/seat/cabin availability. Bookings can be immediately confirmed and there isn't even any need to pick-up the telephone - unless, of course, you need information that isn't there, or the viewdata system is working so slowly that booking over the phone is actually quicker.

The fact is that viewdata has descended from a previous era: BPC - Before Personal Computers. It was introduced at a time when equipping a travel agency with PC's was not an option. The PC's available had but a tiny fraction of the power available today and, in any case, were very expensive. Buying four PC's to go on front office desks would probably have cost more than a complete shop refurbishment. The only high-tech option then was a viewdata terminal.

However, times have moved on and viewdata has some serious limitations when compared with today's technology. Its speed of data transfer is eight times slower than even the slowest modem you can buy now and nearly 100 times slower than the fastest modems. It is also limited to displaying just 25 lines of text, each just 40 characters long. A PC can fit so many characters on-screen that they would be too small to read long before any limitation was reached.

It is quite clear that we should be using the power of our PC's and one recent development does so. Viewdata polling systems were on show at the World Travel Market. They automatically scan price and availability from many viewdata systems and hold information in an agent's PC database. This is a great time saver because the agents can then quickly check their own databases rather than logging onto four or five host systems. However, viewdata is still needed to check real-time availability and make the actual booking.

A development a few years ago that was unsuccessful was the GTI initiative which would have used EDI (Electronic Data Interchange) as the basis of a viewdata replacement. EDI is computer to computer messaging. It's fast and efficient but, due to its very nature, I believe EDI is unacceptable. This is for the simple reason that tour operators and other principals would have no control over the manner in which the information contained in their EDI messages would be displayed on-screen. Can you imagine Heinz or Kellogg's allowing supermarkets to decide how the wrappers should look on their products? An important issue with the GTI initiative was that travel agents would have been obliged to pay for the software they would have needed. This is not something agents are accustomed to doing with viewdata and, in my view, not something that should be a feature of its replacement.

In fact, it is really only in the last year that a vision has emerged of how a viewdata replacement will look and work. That vision is the Internet or, more specifically, the WWW (World Wide Web) and its associated software and programming language. If you already have access to the Internet, you will know that to browse the WWW you first connect to the Internet and then use your WWW browser software to connect you to any WWW site in the World. You can then view successive screens of any type of information. This might be simple text, graphics or pictures.

For example, the TravelWeb site (http://www.travelweb.com/thisco/global/travel.html) provides a series of search forms which enable you to select a hotel based on a wide range of criteria - location, guest facilities, leisure pursuits. Having found the hotel of your choice you can then review photos of the hotel and comprehensive text descriptions. American Airlines site (http://www.amrcorp.com/aa_home/aa_home.htm) provides seat plans for their aircraft so that you can select your particular seat preference prior to booking over the telephone. Value Rent A Car (http://www.neptune.com/value/value.html) provide graphics of their car fleet allowing you to see the car you are going to drive. As with viewdata, WWW is interactive, if you need to send booking information, there will be an on-screen form to fill in. An added bonus is that the software to connect to the Internet and browse WWW is either free or very cheap (under £25 for a licensed copy of the Netscape WWW browser that most people use).

Internet - The Answer

Great, then the Internet is the answer. No, not quite! It is shared with 30 million other users and no single organisation runs it. It is not a managed network and, as good as it is, this means you have no guarantees it is going to work when you need it and no one to shout at when it doesn't. It is also potentially insecure, with data vulnerable to interception. Even if the information you are sending across the Internet is coded, one of the 30 million is bound to be a dedicated hacker who may have the necessary super-computer to break the code. It's already happened once!

So *what* is the answer? My belief is that the industry should be making use of the very sophisticated yet very cheap Internet connection and WWW browsing software that is already well proven by millions of users. This will give a travel principal complete flexibility to describe or display its products on-screen and to design an easy to use on-line booking service. However, rather than use Internet software on the Internet, agents could use it to connect to travel principals over a managed network, just as viewdata does now. The network will be the single organisation responsible for delivery of the service and so agents and principals will know who to speak to should problems occur. Incidentally, I believe the use of pictures and sound needs to be restricted. In data terms, these objects are very large and so take a long time to transfer. A picture is worth a thousand words but may not be worth the wait when fifty words of description might do. I would also be very concerned that agents' time might be wasted by customers wanting to see pictures of resorts and hotels when a booking would already have been made on viewdata. Perhaps pictures will need to be consigned to a 'picture bank', only to be displayed if needed to close a sale.

So, *how and when* is this going to start? As with viewdata many years ago, I believe this will need to be kicked off by a pioneering partnership of a tour operator and a network provider. The tour operator will need to be large enough to pull the market with it. The network provider will need an established high-speed network to deliver the performance; with a comprehensive spread of nodes across the country so that agents have access to a local connection.

The technology exists, so why not before next year's World Travel Market? It is time to stop talking about moving beyond viewdata and to actually do it! ■

** Paul Richer (paul@emailgen.demon.co.uk) is Partner at Genesys-The Travel Technology Consultancy in Boreham-wood, Herts, U.K.*