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World Travel Inc. Builds Real-Time Load Factors Into New Disruption Management Platform

By David Jonas • June 4, 2020

Airlines say they are limiting the number of passengers on flights in an effort to maintain social distancing. Anecdotally, though, plenty of flights are full. Airline approaches vary, the situation will be fluid and there are no guarantees. World Travel Inc. is building a tool to inject some confidence by showing how full flights booked by client travelers are getting.

Introduced last month, the travel management company's WorldWatch disruption management platform offers travel managers some familiar functions. These include access to traveler whereabouts based on booked itineraries, real-time flight status updates, country risk ratings and alerts on weather and security threats. An interactive map shows Covid-19 hotspots and infection rates. Real-time info on expected flight load factors will add a new layer.

"What we define as disruption today versus what it used to be isn't even in the same realm," said World Travel chief innovation officer Rock Blanco during a Tuesday interview. "Are travelers pressured into

having to take that flight or do they have options?"

World Travel expects clients to try the newest product add-on in the next few months as they restart travel programs.

The primary sources of seat utilization info will be APIs from Sabre and Travelport, at least for the "first pass on the development front," Blanco said.

When he demoed the system during a virtual World Travel event on May 27, it indicated in green flights that were 40 percent full or less. At 41 percent to 70 percent capacity, they were yellow. Anything above that was shown in red. Those thresholds are adjustable.

From the client perspective, there's much to sort out. How far in advance do you push the information to travelers? How often? What happens when you see those red numbers?

At the moment, airlines offer flexibility to change and cancel tickets without fees. Would-be passengers on many airlines

can reconsider the journey in the airport or even get off the plane before departure if it's uncomfortably crowded. Some travel managers don't have time to monitor revised flight capacities, so travelers would need to access such pre-trip info for it to be valuable to them. As airlines adjust or revert policies, travelers may have less ability to make no-cost changes.

Users of WorldWatch at least will know where their travelers stand (or sit), and can use that knowledge to make decisions. "The intent is to leverage the content as a means for managing expectations and potentially renegotiations, for example, for airline waivers, based on some insight around real scenarios," Blanco said.



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World Travel Inc.
Chief Innovation Officer

While the WorldWatch platform is tailored to travel managers, planners and executive admins, travelers can get real-time disruption updates through World Travel's mobile app. The TMC hasn't yet decided whether to include seat capacity percentages in the mobile app once the feature is available in WorldWatch. There is no technical barrier to that, said Blanco.

Via its APIs, travel data firm OAG supplies to WorldWatch real-time global flight status and airport updates, including info on inbound flights and tarmac delays for outbound flights. OAG also provides information on equipment changes, as does Cirium, another travel data firm.

"I get that information literally in seconds," Blanco said. Based on it, World Travel does some math to come up with estimated tarmac/taxi times.

Other inputs include the U.S. State Department for advisories, the Federal Aviation Administration for updated flight status and Traxo for bringing in [off-channel bookings](#).

WorldWatch lists health-related advisories, including those regarding Covid-19. Along with the Covid-19 map, an [AI bot](#) answers questions on the topic.

The idea is to match all itineraries against potential threats or [disruptions](#) around the globe. Users can see how many of their travelers are in a particular location or region, with breakdowns by disruption status. This component also uses color-coded indicators, with the most critical displayed in red, "informational" shown in yellow and green used when there are no disruptions. The same convention is used for tracking flights en route and reporting on their status.

“There are full details on all flight, car, rail and hotel segments, including access to the entire reservation,” Blanco said during the demo. “With a simple click, you can identify where travel advisories have been issued for a destination, what travelers are in that location, the length of stay and the local U.S. Embassy contact information.”

WorldWatch lets users configure desktop pop-up notifications. They can establish the kinds of things that trigger such alerts. Maybe it’s anytime there is a cancellation, whenever an airport closes or when any disruption impacts a VIP traveler.

“This all runs behind the scenes and even populates the Windows Notification/Action Center should they be away from their computer and miss an alert,” Blanco said.

He is most excited by WorldWatch’s flight board monitor. “Imagine all the departures and arrivals from all the airlines at all the airports across the world squeezed into one view,” he said.

The board is refreshed every three seconds and displays at-a-glance info on each active itinerary, including flight details, any expected length of delays and, soon, the percentage of booked seats.

On a trip-by-trip basis, for now, seating capacity is a gamble. With severe service reductions, the next flight to the traveler’s destination may not be for a while. When it does depart, will it be just as full as the one they skipped?

Among the big three U.S. carriers, Delta has been most explicit about seating restrictions. Through Sept. 30, it’s disabling the ability to choose middle seats as well as some aisle seats in aircraft with 2×2 seating configurations. It’s also capping seating in all cabins, including a 50 percent limit in first class and 60 percent in main cabins.



“Reducing the overall number of customers on every aircraft across the fleet is one of the most important steps we can take to ensure a

safe experience for our customers and people,” according to chief customer experience officer Bill Lentsch.

American Airlines this month is trying not to fill half of the middle seats on airplanes that have them. “The reason we can’t definitely say half of the middle seats on an aircraft won’t be filled is because we also have seats blocked near flight attendant jump seats to provide more space,” an official explained. AA will notify customers “several days in advance” if flights fill up past the cap and offer no-cost itinerary changes.

According to United, it is “adjusting advance seat selection to avoid seating you next to other travelers, depending on aircraft configuration and cabin.” When the airline expects a “fairly full” flight, United will “do our best to contact you about 24 hours before your departure time.” Travelers then can decide to stick with the plan, make a no-fee change to a different flight, or skip the trip and bank the credit. When announcing the policy last month, United said, “Because our schedule is so reduced (we’re only operating a single flight a day in some destinations), there are a small number of flights where our customers are finding planes fuller than they expect.”

Alaska Airlines “capped sales and blocked off seats through June 30, 2020, to create as much physical distance as possible,” according to its site. Should a flight approach “maximum capacity,” it, too, will “do our best to contact guests in advance” and offer alternatives.

Southwest Airlines said it temporarily reduced the number of passengers on each flight. The carrier, which has open seating, isn’t blocking any.

JetBlue Airways is. Through July 6 it’s blocking middle seats “in rows where parties are not traveling together.” On smaller planes with no middle seats, the carrier is blocking aisle seats. Even with blocked seats, it’s challenging to maintain six feet of distance between everyone onboard,” the airline acknowledged.

“There’s been a lot of great communication from the airlines,” said Gant Travel Management vice president John Brehm during the TMC’s Thursday webinar. “But how many of us have seen the photos of full flights? Everybody is kind of under the assumption that the middle seats will be blocked, but the reality is that you have the option to change your flight if the middle seats are full. We’re going to see that flights will be full if they can get them full.”

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