

# Wave of technology

New IT solutions help improve the passenger experience and increase onboard revenue options. Deborah Harris talks to **Simon Bahad** of Holland America Lines and **Mary Jean Tully** of The Cruise Professionals about how cruise lines are getting technical.

Cruise companies are starting to incorporate next generation IT technology and telecommunication systems that are virtually invisible – and the best thing is, it is not just the staff reaping the rewards, it is for passengers too.

So, what are some of the innovations on the market? For Simon Bahad, director of shipboard operations at Holland America Line (HAL), it is about making significant investments in software applications that focus on guest information, their cruising preferences and their onboard spending behaviour. 'We have, for example, technology in place that lets us identify if a guest likes a glass of milk every night, soft pillows on their beds, or chocolate mints left in their rooms,' he says.

But how do they get this kind of information? 'The ships' Fleet Management System from Fidelio Cruise polls the fleet on a nightly basis. The information is then fed into our Customer Relationship Management application, Seibel. These reports carry demographics: nationality, age and gender. They can also bring up a guest receipt, which identifies where money is being spent, what excursions are being taken – and even the ones they wanted to take, but couldn't. Guest preferences are then sent all the way to the stewards, who are then better informed to take care of customer needs. In essence, the CRM application helps us focus on "personalising" the cruise experience.'

Bahad believes this service is key to what the passenger of the future really wants, 'even if they don't realise it'. It is the kind of technology that not only has the

ability to create a 'seamless experience' and attract returning custom, it is also vital for gathering key marketing information.

'As well as maintaining a record of a customer transaction, our software can keep track of a person's whereabouts,' says Bahad. At first a sinister thought, but the advantages are many-fold. 'We have a lot of eating facilities on our ships, so if a guest, for example, chooses not to show up at a table, and go to another restaurant we'll know straight away; we can then give the table to someone who's waiting.' This is part of the As You Wish Dining experience that HAL offers, which gives a guest the option of eating wherever and whenever they want.

## Getting connected

HAL is also moving towards guests having one card to manage their cruise. The card can be used to access cabins, all the way through to slot machines. The winnings at the casino can then be 'posted' to the card, which can be used to play again, or be credited towards the guest's account. A discounted pre-paid drinks value can also be assigned to the card, which can be bought online before sailing. It is the ideal way to eliminate the need to carry cash or credit cards. Bahad hopes that these services will, in the long term, create loyal, returning guests.

But aside from improving functionality between guests, the ship and its staff, how are cruise lines keeping guests connected to their friends and families? And do passengers actually want to stay in touch with the outside world when they're away? Mary Jean Tully, chairman and CEO of The Cruise Professionals travel agency, works with some of the top companies in the market, and understands guest needs. 'People are going on longer cruises, and they don't mind doing it as long as they can hook up to their mobiles and Blackberrys,' she says. 'The baby boomers are demanding, and they won't go onboard if they can't stay connected. Even people in their 80s are learning how to

'People are going on longer cruises nowadays, and they don't mind doing it as long as they can hook up to their mobiles and Blackberrys.'

send and receive emails. Not only do most cruise ships now have wireless capabilities, some lines, including Cunard Line and Crystal Cruises, even offer classes to help with connectivity and digital technology.'

HAL are keeping up with the game by offering an internet café with access to AOL Chat, Yahoo Chat, and CruisE-mail, for guests who do not have their own email addresses, or cannot access their accounts. The café is convenient for guests, and provides revenue for the company. Aside from the large amount of traffic that is directed to the area, guests can also book shore excursions online.

## 'We are currently working on the idea of putting a call button on all lounge chairs.'

There are also wireless points throughout the ship so guests can use their mobile phones. In the main public areas, Wi-Fi access is available for people who have laptops.

In terms of connectivity, one of the biggest challenges for the marine industry is being out in the open sea. A limited bandwidth makes communicating from the sea back to land by satellite a complicated process. 'We're introducing a technology called Riverbed,' Bahad says. 'It's a network optimisation tool that increases a throughput of network traffic on a limited pipe. In other words it will provide fast internet access.' And in an age where most people do not have the patience to wait five seconds for information, it seems like the way forward.

HAL also bring the access of technology to more cultural pastimes. 'We have shipboard art collections that are valued at tens of millions of dollars,' Bahad says.

'Another thing we do is offer self-guided tours of the collections. This is popular with our guests who feel enriched by the cultural experience. They can either download the tour from iTunes in advance, or get an iPod from the Explorations café.'

There is even technology in place that helps guests with the logistics of their travel. 'We use a programme called SEBS, which for a nominal fee lets us check a passengers luggage all the way through to the airport of their final destination,' Bahad explains. 'They don't need to collect their luggage at the end of the cruise and then check it in again at the airport.' Guests that subscribe to the service have excess weight charges waived by the airlines. Aside from being an additional service, it is a useful tool for generating more revenue for the cruise line.

Much of this technology is fairly new, certainly to the cruise market,

however, Bahad believes this is just the beginning. 'We offer more – and there is more to come... We are currently working on the idea of putting a call button on all lounge chairs, so when a passenger wants a drink they don't have to wait until a steward passes by. They just press the button and the steward, who knows the passenger preferences, is paged; he can then put the order together.'

There is definitely a sense that what appears to be a new generation of ideas and technology is a vital strategy in keeping ahead of the game. 'It is a very competitive industry and the key success factors are differentiation,' Bahad says. 'It is vital to get information and services to people – and to get things done – quickly. We even have software in place to ensure that a broken lamp is dealt with efficiently. Guests don't have to stress about it, or ask about it.'

This is the kind of technology that can completely change a guest experience, and, interestingly, is also good for the environment: no paper required. [wc](#)



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