

Flying in Cyberspace

So you want to buy airline tickets on the Web? Be ready to think fast, type faster.

By Suzanne Boles

"WE DON'T get a discount from airlines anymore so we have to charge customers a user fee," the travel agent tells me. "Your best bet is to call the airline directly. Or if you have Internet access you can just book it on-line."

While I appreciated her honesty, what I really wanted was the good old-fashioned service I used to get without that extra fee. I prefer to deal with people rather than on-line forms, but it's becoming painfully obvious that customer service is going the way of the \$2 bill. Don't wait for a teller when you can bank on-line. Your car needs a tow? While you're waiting for the next available operator you can go to the CAA Web site to book it more quickly. Want movie tickets? Don't stand in line, book on-line. You get the picture. To be honest, I'm actually very comfortable using the Internet, having linked up to the World Wide Web over a decade ago. So I figured this would be easy. Boy, was I ever wrong.

The first thing I learned about booking flights on-line is you need tons of time and nerves of steel. High-speed Internet access is a must and the entire process requires more concentration than driving through rush-hour traffic. Hit the wrong key and you'll be flying to Haiti in March instead of Halifax in May. And most flights are non-refundable, so be sure the kids are tucked snugly into their beds to avoid any distractions.

The Internet has numerous travel sites but, take it from me, they don't know everything. If you go to one of the most popular sites -- Expedia.com -- and ask for flight information from London, Ont., to Edmonton, you'll find lots of flights available via Air Canada. What Expedia doesn't tell you is that WestJet also offers flights. So I decided to go directly to the airlines' Web sites to find the best deal.

I went to one site and keyed in my date and destination and printed off the results. Then I did the same on the other airline site. Going over the itineraries I decided I'd take one airline to Edmonton and return home on the other. I flipped back to the first airline Web site but the information had "timed out," Internet slang for "outta luck, try again." So I opened a second screen and bounced back and forth between the two airlines. Still not fast enough. Both timed out. I'd have to book each one separately.

Another quick lesson -- good prices can be deceiving. Hit Continue and the next screen reveals the taxes and other fees. The so-called discount airline is now about the same price as the other one.

Once you decide on your flight, you have to key in all your personal information. Did I emphasize the word all? Here's where those Grade 9 typing classes come in handy. When I finally finished, I was told that if I didn't want to input my credit card number, I could exit and do so over the phone. After an hour on-line? As if. Oh, and it'll cost more to talk to a real person.

So I stick with typing. Hit Continue and book that flight. Well, not quite. The next message tells me that I need a personal identification number to become a member of the frequent flyer program. Doesn't matter that I don't fly frequently. Without that little PIN, I can't book the flight. Exit to screen number 22 -- or was that 34?

Input all that personal information again (no, it doesn't automatically transfer from section A to B). Pick a password. Then input a question and answer so that if I forget my password, I'll be asked that special question. Answer it correctly and my password will drop into my e-mail box. I input the usual question: "What is my mother's maiden name?" Then the answer. But no -- it has to be at least six letters. Try again.

An hour and a half later and it's time to finalize the flight. However, there's no way to verify the flight information. If I try to go back I'll lose everything. If I hesitate for too long I'll be timed out and have to start all over again. If I sweat any more my fingers will slip off the keyboard. I hit Continue to move on.

Oops! Apparently, 11 screens or so ago, I chose vegetarian meals under my user profile preferences. But in this screen I'm told that I can't choose a special meal until closer to the flight date. Go back one screen, remove the request, and hit Continue -- again.

Warning Will Robinson! I shouldn't have input my PIN. The one I got a few screens back to confirm that I'll soon be a member of the frequent flyer program. The one that I had to have to book this flight. The airline needs 48 hours to confirm the number. Go back and remove it. Hit Continue again -- and ask myself why I just wasted half an hour providing all that information for a number I can't even use.

Time to sign off. Am I sure I want to do this? Do I have the right flight? Time? Date? Heck, it's two hours later. I could have flown there by now. My head is throbbing and the screen is beginning to blur. I don't care if I booked a flight to Hong Kong in 2010. Just let me out of here!

A few minutes later an electronic airline ticket slides into my e-mail in-box. This is what I'm supposed to use to board the airline? What happened to that nicely typed itinerary my travel agent used to staple to the front of the airline ticket envelope? Where's the ticket with the perforated stub? Will I actually see a real person when I board the plane or will it be on autopilot? Are there any real people out there? Can anyone hear me? HELLO!