

Reservations efforts smooth on-time at airports

Wouldn't it be remarkable if all passengers had to do upon arriving at the airport was go directly from the parking lot to the boarding gate of their awaiting flight?

Well, due to the behind-the-scenes efforts of thousands of Piedmont general sales agents and reservations support people, this very situation takes place every day across our system. Piedmont's pre-paid ticketing, itinerary pricing and other pre-travel arrangements not only make for remarkably efficient check-ins, but are key elements to operating an on-time airline.

At first glance, most employees would readily recognize such items as crew changes, seat assignment problems, and late arrivals of aircraft and baggage as having the greatest impact on our daily on-time performance.

But, Piedmont's concern with performance, and efforts toward improving and maintaining it, begin the moment a general sales agent—a reservations agent—responds to an incoming call at one of our seven reservation centers.

Johnnie Tayloe, manager-reservations and support services, said the contributions sales agents make toward Piedmont's on-time performance primarily involve assuring that passengers are well-informed of their flights ahead of time, including any possible last-minute changes, and that most of the leg work is out of the way before their arrival at the boarding gate. This in turn allows station agents to spend more time with last-minute passengers and their immediate needs, and subsequently, more time to spend signing off departing flights.

"If we do our job right, we positively affect on-time operations. This not only helps build an on-time airline, but a better airline with better services to offer its customers," Tayloe said.

Among the procedural questions and suggestions an agent raises during a reservations call, the passengers-to-be are encouraged to take advantage of Piedmont's time saving ticketing options. According to John Elrod, manager-reservations services, this includes advance purchases at any of Piedmont's 44 travel offices, or through a travel agent. But even more convenient is Piedmont's TBM program—tickets by mail—which accounted for more than 12 percent of the total tickets issued by Piedmont last year.

In fact, the TBM department has just recently purchased and imple-

mented a new computerized document assembly system that will speed up the process by which these special tickets are issued—and at a significant savings over the present, less automated method.

Gene Cox, manager-reservation ticketing services, is currently overseeing the operation of the new system at Winston-Salem's reservations support facility.

Manufactured in West Germany under the name of BOWE, this new machine processes, stuffs and stamps personalized ticket booklets complete with a greeting page, an itinerary page, special fare announcements, and the appropriate number of boarding passes with seat assignments as called for by each particular TBM reservation.

"By getting as many TBMs with boarding passes out there as possible, we help keep the lines down at the stations," Cox said. "It's simply a matter of checking bags at that point."

Another advantage of issuing a boarding pass is that it allows Piedmont to offer the same service as other carriers and travel agents who regularly provide printed boarding passes and advance seat assignments, he said.

Pat Livengood, a general sales agent-INTRO, says that if reservations do not inform passengers that TBMs exist, or that they can simply pick up their tickets at a CTO, many probably would assume they had to go to the airport on the day of travel to do all this work at the last minute.

"They'd have to wait in lengthy lines, tie up the station agents, and jeopardize on-time departures. We can offer all this preparation work, get it out of the way for the station people, and help keep the aircraft running on time," she said.

The reservations support staff also double checks pre-paid reservations just prior to the day of departure, Elrod said, in an attempt to catch potential ticket problems or flight irregularities that might otherwise take precious time to clear up at the airport.

In addition, if there are problems that could hinder ground transportation to the airport—for instance, nearby road construction, new or blocked parking decks, or a concourse change where Piedmont's gates and facilities have been relocated—support personnel will call passengers ahead of time and alert them of this information. They might also ask passengers to consider heading out to the airport a little sooner than normal. All of



During a recent systems check of the new BOWE document assembly process, (right to left) Bob Dillon, senior programmer, and Gene Cox, manager-reservation ticketing services, reviewed the optical mark characters that determine the assembly process for each ticket-by-mail booklet, while Mike Mitchke, Bruce Macfarlane, and Karen Salmons, system operators, tended to other aspects of the process.

this information, contained in CAREsystem's DRS (direct reference system), is updated on a monthly basis in cooperation with each of the station managers throughout the system.

Reservations agents also have been trained to fill in as live links, of sorts, with a station that has suffered a systems failure, Elrod said.

"If data lines to an airport are damaged for some reason, our agents will remain on telephone standby with the affected station, allowing agents there to continue the reservations and ticketing process. In many cases, this has been the difference between an on-time departure and a major delay," he said.

A little farther behind the front line are the various support functions that also help speed up our daily reservations and ticketing services in the field. Our general sales agents and station personnel constantly rely on the fare and routing information that the itinerary pricing department provides. The vast majority of Piedmont's fare structures on any given day, including routings and connections, are fingertip accessible to agents via the CAREsystem, 24-hours-a-day.

However, according to Tayloe, there are some exceptions, and itinerary pricing's rate desk and international desk are there for immediate assistance.

"When passengers require out-of-the-ordinary domestic routings, or require international connections, our station agents can instantly refer to the respective rate desk and get passengers on their way," Tayloe said. "These desks are frequently called upon to assist agents with the ever-changing regulations, documentation and currency exchange rates that are involved with travel to a different country," Tayloe said.

Reservations support also comes in the form of setting up group bookings ahead of time, with pre-assigned blocks of seats reserved for 10 or more passengers traveling together. Attempting to set aside a series of adjoining seats at the last minute could put any station agent into a very difficult relations situation. And the same is true for the lengthy questionnaire that must be completed by the parents of unaccompanied children.

"For every enlightened, prepared and relaxed traveler with a pre-paid ticket in hand, there is one less passenger in line at the ticket counter," Tayloe said. "And for every passenger waiting to be ticketed, that means there is one less passenger at the gate ready to board. Add a few extra minutes for the misdirected family that missed a gate change announcement; a bit of general confusion; a few late arriving passengers; and what you've got is a potentially messy, time-consuming operation.

"But with the help of our reservations support, we've got the potential to maintain a degree of on-time performance that can far exceed the norm."

system performance

For three consecutive months we have exceeded our departure goals. In the month of April we surpassed March's record performance and topped April of a year ago as shown by the graph. April 1988 is the best April performance on record.

The station on-time committees continue to play an important role in on-time performance (OTP) by sending in recommendations on critical flights. We urge these committees to invite other departments in their station to the meetings such as: maintenance, pilots, flight attendants and catering. This would emphasize that OTP is a team effort and that all departments must communicate and work together to assure a fourth consecutive month of exceeding our goals.

Remember, OTP is a team effort and every Piedmont employee must play for us to be successful.

