

# Fast Track

## Software

### ITA set to launch airline travel planner

Who knows? The suffering endured by thousands of stranded travelers during the recent American Airlines labor clash might have turned out differently if Jeremy Wertheimer's ITA Software Inc. had already introduced its new travel planning software.

As it is, ITA, based in Kendall Square in Cambridge, won't introduce its product until next month.

But once it's out, booking air travel may never be the same, Wertheimer predicts, as travelers become able to use laptops or Palm Pilots to search out, on their own, schedule and fare options far beyond the normal capabilities of even the largest existing airline reservations systems.

Where Travelocity, the popular on-line reservation service, answers a request for "lowest fares" by coughing out three replies at a time, ITA's software evaluates every option in the mainframe database, and offers routings that go well beyond the usual nonstop or one-stop selections. "Rather than 400 possibilities, we evaluate 400 million," says Wertheimer.

This means a Boston-to-Boise traveler, along with flights via Denver, Salt Lake City, or Minneapolis, also could choose to go by way of Cleveland or Seattle or Calgary. Some might involve two stops or seem out of the way, but they also might be much cheaper or better suited to the traveler's schedule.

Wertheimer, 37, founded ITA in 1994, after completing his doctoral degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in artificial intelligence — a field well-suited to producing the complex equations airlines use to convert millions of daily details about their business into useful profit-and-loss data.

It is this maze of detail that limits the ability of even the best computer reservation systems to produce every option a traveler might need.

Experienced travel agents know intuitively how to dig deeper, but this skill gets stale quickly, says Wertheimer. "There are 10 million fares out there and they change nine times a day."

ITA's software officially has no name yet. At trade shows, Wertheimer hears it called "ITA's low-fare search system." He calls it Internet Travel Agent, although the company's initials, chosen before most people knew about the Internet, stand for something only an artificial intelligence guru could appreciate — Ivory Tower Algorithms. "It's a joke," he says meekly.

It's no joke, though, to the Amadeus reservation system, owned by Air France, Lufthansa, Iberia, and several other European carriers. Amadeus last year became ITA's first outside investor, taking a 20 percent stake in the Cambridge company and becoming the first reservation system to license the product.

Wertheimer said other reservation systems, travel agents, and specialized on-line business travel services such as E-Travel Inc. of Concord are also interested. ITA now has 10 employees, eight of them MIT graduates.