

Travel basics: Profitable ITA expands travelers' options

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Algorithms for bargain shopping are the answer to a frugal traveler's prayers, as well as the day-to-day business at ITA Software.

ITA's system, which uses PCs instead of mainframes, searches all available airline flights for best available prices given a specified date. ITA runs airfare search programs for heavy-hitting customers including Orbitz, Continental, Air Canada and America West.

And with Forrester Research citing six out of 10 online airline ticket buyers as more interested in price than carrier, ITA's professional mission is vali-

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Jeremy Wertheimer, CEO, ITA

dated as it takes its technology a step further.

Now ITA's travel technology can help users search to find the best deals that day, the day before and the day after. Would-be travelers can consider three days of travel itinerary options, expanding their choice of deals threefold.

"It's straightforward computer science," said Jeremy Wertheimer, ITA CEO and co-founder. "It solves the problem completely, by literally finding all of the answers, no matter how many there are and displaying the ones the customer wants to see."

ITA is already providing the expanded search service for America West and is poised to announce new partners any day.

Wertheimer, a MIT artificial intelligence lab graduate, said his company uses rows of Linux-based servers, something new and improved for the airline industry. The system not only produces options for users looking to get from here to there, but also suggests leaving from a smaller airport close to here or there for expanded fare options.

"What ITA is doing is teaching the airline industry how to price," said Henry Harteveltd, Forrester Research travel analyst, in a published report.

And it is now doing it internationally.

Wertheimer announced that ITA is now searching and providing price-first and the trio of days flight data for international flights on Continental. More airlines are expected to follow suit.

ITA receives data from "many different sources in the industry," Wertheimer said, including airfare information wired many times a day and seat availability updated every second. He said many millions of customers use ITA's system every month, as the company bills its customers based on different models, most frequently on a per-transaction basis.

ITA's name comes from Internet Travel Agent, while the best-price system has only an internal moniker used among company engineers. In the early days of commercial air travel, the industry didn't think it possible to have flights more than 24-hours long. When it did happen, the airline industry cooked up a fictitious connection point to link the one long flight into two on the books. That connection point was called QPX, the name adopted by ITA for its low fare search system.

"At some point we'll probably have to come up with a cool name," Wertheimer said.

Private and profitable, ITA now employs 50, doubling every year since launching in '99. The company is doing so well, it's hiring quality assurance and operations people. But be warned: The flood of résumés going into ITA means candidates are given a programming problem to solve, and they must demonstrate how they'd do it.

Perhaps they'll come up with some bargain shopping algorithms to get online customers bumped up to first class.