



# Log on, check in and fly out

Self-service check-in options are nothing new but their adoption has been tentative at best. **Adrian Dunne** of Ryanair tells Ian Duncan how the airline has managed to slash its use of terminal resources and what impact that could have on airport operators.

**Adrian Dunne**

Adrian Dunne is deputy director of ground operations at Ryanair, based in Eire, Ireland. Before Ryanair, he was the Aer Lingus station manager at Dublin Airport for a number of years.

**W**ith passenger numbers increasing, many airport terminals are being pushed to their limits. Boosting capacity traditionally required expensive and time consuming investment in new infrastructure, but now budget carriers are pioneering new ways of managing passenger flow using existing resources.

Self-service options at the airport and online enable customers to take greater control of reservations and checking in. This can also reduce queues and the need for manned desks. Automated kiosks are now common in airports, but figures from the 2009 SITA Air Transport World Passenger Self-Service Survey suggest that self-service usage stands at 44% globally. However, the figure is considerably higher in developed country markets, and is growing year-on-year.

To outperform these averages, no-frills Irish airline Ryanair has been experimenting with a comprehensive self-service strategy at Stansted, its major base of operations. Spotting an opportunity to make better use of terminal resources, BAA, the airport's operator, which also runs Heathrow, is watching carefully.

**Simplicity's sake**

In October 2008, 78 kiosks were installed to handle check-in and upgrade options. In March 2009, the carrier announced a move to online-check-in procedures, offering a bag-drop-only service. Ryanair passengers without a boarding card, not just those out of Stansted, will have a £40 charge – more than the average ticket price.

In many respects the strategy has been successful. Online check-in is most effective when passengers only travel with hand luggage, because they go directly to the gate. The SITA-ATW figures indicate that checking in bags

is the main reason passengers avoid self-service. By charging heavy fees on hold baggage, Ryanair cut average bags per customer to 0.4, reducing the need for drop desks. In case passengers' requirements change at the last minute, the self-service machines have a chip-and-pin payment facility.

Adrian Dunne, the company's deputy director of ground operations, believes technological change has to be backed up with initiatives to change customer behaviour. "You could make web check-in available without an incentive for people to use it," he says. "But you

loads have dropped but people still have bags," he says. "Kiosks reduce the load on the traditional ticket desks."

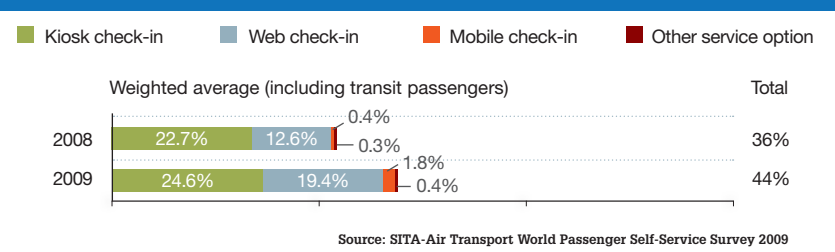
**Travel light**

A barcode system on boarding cards enables the automated printing of tags, further speeding up the process. Dunne adds that the flexibility of online check-in and self-service has brought real benefits to customers. "Many of our passengers only carry cabin baggage, so we've eliminated the need for a check-in desk," he says.

However, he admits that the airline does little to conduct customer

**“ You could make web check-in available without an incentive for people to use it, but you still need the desks and airport staff, and it becomes hard to predict your required resources.”**

**Figure 1. The growth in self-service options**



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Achieving consistent usage is vital for cutbacks to infrastructure, and reducing the number of check-in desks is only possible if an airline is confident customers will not be relying on them.

Ryanair passengers are aware of the airline's pared-down service model, and for Dunne the challenge is improving efficiency without sacrificing ease of use. "Our baggage

surveys. "This year we will carry 75 million passengers and that's our ultimate survey," he says. "People vote with their feet and if they weren't happy they wouldn't travel with us."

Passengers without hold luggage can now pass through to the gate when they arrive at the airport and, to reduce queues, the baggage drop desks open an additional hour before departure. "Queuing time at Stansted is now practically non-existent," Dunne says.

Ryanair has been pushing the

transition towards self-service, but the airport's owner, BAA, is slowly learning how to be more resourceful. New models could soften the calls for ever-larger terminal buildings by allowing passengers to be processed more quickly.

Dunne is cautiously optimistic. "BAA needs to realise that it doesn't need huge 'Taj Mahal' facilities," he says. "There are more efficient ways of developing airport terminals."

### **Straightening system glitches**

The switchover has not been without difficulties. On a busy Saturday in the middle of the summer holiday season last year, the airline scheduled 255 flights from Stansted, but hundreds of passengers were stranded when they were not checked in in time.

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Only eleven desks were open on that day, for which Dunne blames Swissport, the airline's handling agent at Stansted. "That was down to not having enough people in place," he explains. "We put a team of people in place to make sure that the issue was corrected."

The system was challenged again this April when ash from the erupting Eyjafjallajökull volcano grounded flights. With kiosks, Ryanair was better placed to handle the problems. Dunne claims that even if it were operating check-in desks, the airline would not have had enough agents to deal with the situation, whereas the self-service machines are always on-hand.

The company's online booking system allows customers to manage their own re-bookings or request a refund from the airline. While this facility is currently only



available through Ryanair.com, the next kiosk development is to connect them to the web.

"This is the way forward," Dunne says. "Take the problem we had with the volcanic ash; you can never plan something like that, but it's easier and cheaper to put a kiosk in place."

Ryanair has learnt from the retooling of its operations at Stansted,

suggesting new ways to maximise the use of terminal resources, and plans to roll out kiosks across all its other bases. Self-service machines are now common in terminals, but whether other airlines will follow the other aspects of the budget carrier's strategy is hard to tell. In the face of rising costs, they might find themselves without any choice. ■