Can RFID Technology Help Resolve the Airline Debacle?

Within the last several months I've been on a plane more than usual. To say the least, they were not pleasant experiences and the customer support was practically nonexistent. Considering the state of affairs the airline industry is in right now, I felt compelled to do a little investigating on my own to find out how bad things really are and what steps are being taken by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) to improve the situation.

In this process, I came across a news item reporting that a major US carrier and a wireless provider will begin offering WiFi service on select planes in 2008. Over 802.11 a/b/g, a passenger will be able to check email and perform other Internet-related activities while sitting those soft, cushy, spacious seats. I guess this is another way that carriers can differentiate themselves from their competition, while at the same time opening up an avenue of Return on Investment (ROI).

I couldn't help but find this offering somewhat humorous. Although it may be very convenient for the average business traveler, most airlines seem to be overlooking the one item that would easily put them over the top with their competition &#151 service.

For starters, improve the baggage handling system. With the baggage tracking system being used today (bar code ticketing and tagging) there are only two times that a traveler knows exactly where his/her bag is located: when it's checked in and when it's retrieved. Bar code labels accurately associate passengers with their baggage, but identifying the right bag with the right plane at any point in time can be difficult, particularly when bags are being transferred from one plane to another.

As a possible solution, I would like to see the entire airline industry start investing and taking the necessary steps to implement an RFID baggage tracking system, which will help lower operating overhead, improve passenger processing and keep planes on schedule. These are just a few of the advantages for making the investment. Initially, the ROI is going to be on the repeat customers, who are satisfied with their flying experience, tell their friends and colleagues etc. increasing their customer base.

I realize to implement an RFID baggage tracking system there are a number of road blocks in the path to achieving a wider adoption &#151 number one being cost. The tag price must come down in order to compete with existing bar code tracking systems. And there is the question of who will pay for all of this &#151 the airlines or the airport operators which must be resolved.

RFID has the potential to be a powerful enabling technology in airport operations around the world, offering many opportunities for airlines to recoup money spent on the increased cost of operation over the past several years. Wouldn’t offering improved service and convenience to travelers represent that differentiating factor each airline is looking for, allowing them to gain a bigger piece of the pie?

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