

CONFERENCE REVIEW

XML FOR THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY Café Royal, London, 19 – 20 June 2001

This early summer conference, organised by IQPC and chaired by Neil Goram of the Travel Technology Initiative (TTI), focused on the application and business benefits of XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language) and common standards in the travel industry.

As Andy Mayes, TTI Consultant, explained, XML stands for eXtensible Mark-up Language. It is a tool for creating proprietary, custom languages containing content-descriptive tags. XML is a variation of SGML (Standard Generalized Mark-up Language), a heavyweight document management language created in the 1960s, which is also the precursor of HTML (Hyper Text Mark-up Language). XML documents are based on schemas, which refer to shared vocabularies and aim to define the structure, content and semantics of XML documents. The components of XML documents are elements, which contain information or content and may contain other elements, and attributes, which provide additional information about elements.

Mario Hardy, Director of Database Management for OAG Worldwide, drew attention to the versatility of XML by presenting a case study on the application of the technology to its schedules database data exchanges. He concluded that, due to their versatility, XML tags allow organisations to transmit content without any additional reprogramming, enhancing the speed of exchanges and improving data synchronisation.

Alyson Dombey, Partner at consultancy Partners in Marketing, further expanded on the business benefits of XML, by drawing attention to the opportunities opened up by multi-channel distribution. While current technology limitations often require consumers to navigate around several different platforms and technologies in order to complete a purchase, XML truly empowers both consumer and suppliers, as it promotes greater choice, cost-effectiveness, increased competitiveness and, through improved communications, a shift towards relationship-centred distribution strategies. However, Ms Dombey warned, XML should not be considered a panacea: as a facilitator, the key to

its success relies on collaboration between companies, who need to contribute to the development of common standards.

Other speakers on the first day included Paul Spencer, Chief Technology Officer for AlphaXML, who discussed the benefits of XML for online gateways and booking engines; Mathew Hart, E-commerce Director of Holiday Autos International, who demonstrated how XML can enhance the effectiveness and value of strategic online partnerships; and Mike Kistner, Board Chairman of the Open Travel Alliance (OTA), who presented the activities of his Organisation, whose mission is to specify and constantly develop common XML standards across the travel industry.

Presentations were followed by a panel discussion featuring members of the OTA (Mike Kistner), TTI (Andy Mayes), the International Federation for IT and Travel & Tourism (IFITT) (Dr. Karsten Kärcher) and the E-Commerce and Tourism Research Laboratory (eCTRL) (Prof. Dr. Hannes Werthner), during which further issues for discussion were raised by the audience. One of these was the need to ensure that the OTA effort is global and that it moves in parallel in Europe and North America. From this ensued the case for the creation of an umbrella structure, unifying global common standards organisations. It was also noted that, while testing through implementation is essential to ensure standards fulfil business needs, there are presently not enough companies applying standards, despite a uniform acknowledgement of the validity of the XML language.

The second day of the conference saw a shift towards technical case studies concerning the implementation of XML. Tim Webb, IT Architect for Avis Europe, described how XML technologies may be integrated to existing legacy structures. The strategy adopted by Avis consisted in the analysis of current system functionality, followed by the identification of gaps between performance and customer expectations. These gaps would then be filled by new functionality, which would be combined, and made compatible with, the legacy system through XML messages, in effect wrapping legacy with XML. However, Mr Webb recommended, before implementing such changes, it is vital to truly

understand the legacy system in use and its undocumented features, and consequently ensure that changes are implemented effectively.

Rob McDonald, Technical Director of the Online Travel Corporation (OTC), discussed the uses of XML as a tool for website integration. Presenting a case study on how to adapt unbranded content to a branded site, Mr McDonald expressed his belief that XML constitutes an efficient technology to distribute data. XML allows content to be drawn dynamically from the OTC database and sent to relevant sites. XML back-end feeds are also used to negotiate inventory data with GDSs and hotel, cruise and car-hire CRSs. The technology is highly scalable and, being middleware focused, it is easily integrated without changes to the core system.

Further contributions on the day were made by Massimo Monari, Senior Systems Engineer at Alitalia, who demonstrated how XML can be used to implement a gradual move away from legacy technology whilst ensuring seamless communications with partners old and new; Chris Nourse, General Manager for Multicom Products, whose case study revolved around the transmission of Viewdata communications between customer and supplier interfaces through XML messages; and Grant Rodger, Technical Design Authority for Lastminute.com, who presented a case study on the implementation of XML messages to keyword searches on the latminute.com web site.

The conference was successful in providing an overview of the several different ways in which XML can be integrated to old and new travel distribution technologies. However, the topical question, highlighted by Chairman Neil Goram of the TTI, still remains: will the travel industry seize the opportunity offered by XML, and are its many trade sectors prepared to work together to further develop the technology and to unify standards across its different trade sectors?