

# Picking up the

**W**hen they first hit the high streets in the early 1980s, front and back office systems were very separate machines.

Sales consultants made viewdata or global distribution system bookings in the front of the shop, while managers looked after the finances at the back. They could store booking details on some back office systems, but they had to remember to key them in once the reservation was made.

"We had our back office system in the shop, so we would enter details as soon as we made a booking," recalls David Caborn, then an agent and now sales and marketing director for Sheffield-based systems supplier Voyager. "It meant we could print the customer's receipt and it saved entering booking details in the ledger and diary. I remember how amazed we were to see a dot-matrix printer in action."

The big changes started taking shape in the early 1990s, when systems suppliers networked the front and back office, enabling bookings made on viewdata and the GDSs to be transferred to the back office.

"The integrated front and back office system was really a big breakthrough," comments Paul Richer, partner in travel technology consultancy Genesys. "Suddenly everything was on one system to help with the management and agents could create client databases."

The principals of front and back office systems have not changed since

Agents still appear to be a long way from true technology integration when it comes to front and back office systems.

## Jane Archer reports

that moment of integration — one for booking and one for finance and administration — except there is a lot more functionality, reflecting the increasing complexity of the travel agency environment.

Back office systems now integrate through the front office with the internet, for example. Dolphin Dynamics' Flightscanner Enterprise, which searches for and books low-cost airline fares on the web, can be fully integrated with Dolphin for Windows or any other back-office system.

They also integrate with the new-generation agency portals such as Vertical Group's Magic Desktop and Telewest's Endeavour. These provide agents with internet and e-mail access and give them the ability to connect to viewdata over the internet and search for holidays from several operators at once.

Each portal has various other functions, including access to a GDS or the Foreign & Commonwealth Office website, all designed to make agents more efficient.

## Getting up to date

The amount of data collected by GDS front office applications is also growing all the time — the GDSs have coined the phrase Super PNR to describe it — and it has to be stored at the back end. In addition, business travel agency systems have had to be upgraded to cope with fees instead of commission payments.

Added to this is the latest trend for functionality that turns retailers into operators, some no longer just putting together elements of a package such as flight, car hire and hotel, but actually storing inventory and creating tours.

Powersoft added tours functionality to its TS Travel front and back office system in 2002. It holds inventory in tables, which can be booked as individual components or bundled as a package.

They can create a one-off package to meet a client's request or use the inventory set-up wizard to create a tour with regular departures throughout the season. The 'package booking assistant' helps them to bundle separate components, to which they can add extras such as airport parking.

Colin Eley, Powersoft managing director, says: "The definition of operators and agents is becoming blurred as independents move into operating because margins are better and because today's travellers don't want standard packages — they want to pick and mix."



hall, with a capacity of 2,000," he explains. "With the old airport also becoming an exhibition and conference centre, Athens will have the ingredients to appeal to group organisers.

"They are already telling us there will be tremendous demand after the Olympics and we are presenting them with many other opportunities for meetings in Rhodes, Crete, Kos [the ABTA Convention venue in 2000] and other centres with good infrastructure.

"Athens will capitalise on all the interest and has the quality of beds it needs. But it has not increased hotel capacity so much that it will have problems filling hotels after the Games.

"We already expect the Games to have a tremendous effect on demand for city breaks next year."

### Taking time

Athens is under-performing in the city breaks market and not even making the top 20 for major operators. They expect growth to resume in 2005.

Bridge Cities product manager Caroline Rankin says: "When we were out contracting for 2004, the month of August was excluded as all hotel rooms in Athens have been allocated to the Olympic Committee.

"There is already a growing interest in Athens and it is likely there will be limited availability both in the run-up to the Olympics and immediately afterwards. I am sure the Olympics will give a real boost to Athens as a year-round city break destination and to Greece as a whole."

Cresta Cities product manager Michelle Gordon adds: "There is currently no notable increase in bookings to Athens and as hoteliers have had to surrender 90% of their rooms to the Olympics organisers, we are not expecting to see an increase in sales until after the event.

"Experience of the Barcelona Olympics indicates that the increased coverage the destination receives will lead to renewed public interest."

Thomson Cities and Short Breaks' Athens product executive Anna Perrin says: "At present Athens is undergoing a large-scale refurbishment and clean-up programme, so in fact our advice to clients is to wait until these have finished. We are confident that Athens will become an 'in vogue' city once the Games have finished."

TravelScene brand manager Angus Barr adds: "There has been lots of negative publicity, raising doubts as to whether the city will be ready for the Games. It is not surprising that clients are holding off from booking between now and August."

With mass market operators to beach resorts regarding the Games as at best irrelevant, it isn't surprising the trade is lukewarm about the Olympics.

But if Greece gets it right — as more people are now confident will be the case — Athens has the potential to rival Barcelona or Sydney as a hip city within a couple of years of hosting the big event. ☐



# Destination Greece



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INTERDYNAMIC S. A. 135 Ethn. Antistaseos St., Heraklion, 71306 Crete, Greece, Tel: +30 2810 300330, Fax: +30 2810 220785, Email: [inio@interdynamic.net](mailto:inio@interdynamic.net)  
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