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Print Media, Airlines and the Internet

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Six Sigma can be everywhere

by Praveen Gupta



At a recent committee meeting of a professional association, the speaker talked about print media and the Internet. Print media are struggling because the Internet can more easily disseminate information. The Internet is changing the world, and print media are those most directly affected by this change.

Just recently, I was supposed to conduct an audit in two cities—Lincoln, Nebraska, and Albany, New York. Unfortunately, due to weather conditions (or airline conditions), the flights couldn't leave O'Hare airport in Chicago, where I was. After two attempts, I decided to perform the audit remotely using video conferencing and to forget about traveling, and it worked out well. Suddenly I realized that airlines are also being greatly affected by the Internet.

Putting these two incidents together, I realized that there must be similarities among the print media, the Internet and airline companies: the Internet is overwhelming the other two. Content for magazines and newspapers is well researched, well written and published periodically. With the Internet, a story is delivered as it evolves.

The speaker in the committee meeting mentioned that, due to competition for the advertising dollars, newspapers are getting less ad money, their budgets are shrinking and many journalists are being laid off. Fewer journalists working at the papers means increased workloads, less time for research, and eventually poorer-quality stories and reduced circulation. This leads to cost cutting, which means reduced number of pages, which can lead to acquisition or merger, or simply oblivion. The Internet provides readers with news and stories faster than print media, with easier access and for less money, because the cost of production and distribution are much less.

How do airlines compete with the Internet? Print media and the Internet distribute information in a physical and a virtual medium, respectively. Similarly, airline companies and the Internet move people in a real and a virtual sense. People who travel to meetings can now meet online. Many trips can be replaced by audio or video conferencing, reducing travel costs. Unless one needs to meet someone in person, travel can be significantly curtailed. Given the hikes in price for air travel due to fuel costs, reduced number of flights, more cancellations and over-booked flights, passenger inconveniences are going to increase and motivation for air travel will seriously be diminished.

I don't read newspapers any more because most of the news is already old. I still subscribe to a newspaper, but I question why I buy it every day. I only read my horoscope in the newspaper to know the outlook for my day, and that too can be read on Internet. I only skim magazines because most of the articles don't interest me; I usually read only the table of contents. For print media, the solution appears to be the packaging of information from various sources, including the Internet, made available on demand. Instead of publishing ordinary, hardcopy magazines, publishers should publish on-demand magazines consisting of articles of interest to the reader. It sounds like the concept of mass customization we hear sometime.

As to the airlines, they may be in much more serious trouble, given the current model and cost of doing business. In the 80s air travel was luxurious—excellent service, great meals well served on beautiful china. The menu would include steak, pizza, sandwiches or other full meals. Today, we're lucky if we get peanuts, and airlines are more interested in selling food than in the quality of passenger service. They forget that passengers have already paid for the flight and the airlines asking a few more bucks for food sounds like nonsense to us. Airlines could just offer a basket of fruits and snacks and let passengers pick something themselves.

Airline employees have told me many times that their job is to move passengers from point A to point B, period. They don't care about how comfortable or how efficient air passengers' experiences are, and most airlines lose a lot of money. What is the solution? Here comes the fun part.

The solution lies in flying passengers free. Great! How would airlines make money then? Well, on the Internet basic services are essentially free and customized services cost money. Airlines can transport people at no cost, and become an advertising communication medium directly interfacing with the

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customers, providing great value to their clients for the marketing dollars.

Every overhead cabin can become a billboard. Imagine all stow cabins marketing something to the passengers. These billboards could be digital, offering personalized ads based on the passenger's profile. They could become "shopping malls" in the air, and they could provide entertainment. Movies or electronic games on demand could be a phone call away. As with cell phones, another communication medium, the device is free, but the service costs money. Airlines could be communication media where travel is free, but they'd offer a lot more value for additional cost, to achieve sustained profitable growth.

These solutions may sound crazy, stupid or funny, but they're really just innovative, something different. Because of the Internet, it sounds like print media and airline companies have their work cut out for them. Maybe they should study commonalities and differences between them. Both industries must change their guidelines, because beating the same old path won't produce different results. This article, I hope, will make some people in the airline industry think totally differently—yes, flying free. I love the idea!

This discussion may appear to have nothing to do with the rote application of the Six Sigma methodology (DMAIC), or the tools, such as Pareto charts, basic statistics or control charts. However, the intent of Six Sigma is fully represented in this discussion—generating fast improvement with innovation and producing positive results. That is Six Sigma!

About the author

Praveen Gupta, president of [Accelper Consulting](#), helps clients in the areas of Six Sigma, lean, business scorecard and innovation. He has authored several books including [Six Sigma Business Scorecard](#) (McGraw-Hill Co., 2003), [Six Sigma Performance Handbook](#) (McGraw-Hill Co., 2004) and Business Innovation, which will be released at the end of 2006. Praveen writes monthly for Quality Digest's InsideSixSigma newsletter.

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