

Tampa International Airport Reduces Congestion and Improves Customer Satisfaction with a Remote Cell Phone Lot and Passenger Communications

Introduction



In November 2005, Tampa International Airport began a large scale project to open a remote cellular phone lot, approximately two miles

from the main terminal. The project was undertaken in an effort to relieve congestion at baggage claim curbside and to expedite the time it took passengers to retrieve their baggage and leave the airport. The airport worked with Com-Net Software and local General Contractor, RM Williams Construction, to provide a turnkey solution that includes flight information on large format LEDs. Results show marked improvement in customer satisfaction and a decrease in congestion.

For more pictures of the cellular phone lot, visit www.comnetsoftware.com

The Challenge

Tampa International Airport (TPA) has enjoyed the windfall of growth that comes with supporting one of the fastest growing economies in the United States over the past several years. TPA's passenger growth continues to increase at twice the national average. This is a story that any airport executive is proud to tell, but Jim Jones, Director of Engineering at Tampa International Airport adds, "The upside has not been without growing pains."

Add a rapidly expanding population, an already popular destination, and tougher restrictions since 9/11 and you have a recipe for congestion. At peak travel times, it was not uncommon to have four or five rows of cars, as far as one could see at curbside, picking up passengers or simply waiting until their parties arrived. The result: hundreds of gridlocked cars, tempers flaring from traffic personnel and passengers, and a serious threat to customer satisfaction.

"In 2003 we added large LEDs with flight information on the wall outside of baggage claim," explained Jones. "The goal was to keep cars moving if their passengers' flight had not arrived. What we found was a decline in stopped traffic, which was good, but traffic around the airport and through the passenger pickup area remained heavy." It remained a burden upon traffic personnel and on the roadways themselves. Tampa had also implemented free one hour of parking for meeters and greeters in the short term parking garage adjacent to the curbside areas. Once more, the incentive helped some but not enough to make a significant impact.

In a region rich with competitive pressure, Tampa's executive leadership knew that this was an important problem to address. Sharon Weaver, Director of Administration and Information Technology, explained "We focused on implementing new solutions to address customer service issues and on improving utilization of infrastructure that was already in place". The top priority

for the airport was to expedite travelers from plane to pickup. While this involves several processes, the airport authority and Board members thought that the most processes were executed well and that the most efficiency can be gained on the passenger loading process. To accomplish this, they would have to keep the unnecessary traffic away from curbside until the right time. Additionally the solution had to leverage other investments where possible and be cost effective.

The Board decided that the solution to the problem could be found with a blend of strategies - part technical and part concrete. Executive Director, Louis Miller, suggested a cellular phone lot, where meeters and greeters could wait, off site, until their passenger called to notify them when they were ready to be picked up. Other Board members suggested adding remote flight information, extending current flight status beyond the premises of the airport, in an effort to keep traffic off site until the flight arrived. A combination of these strategies was eventually adopted by the Board and senior leadership. Tampa possessed both: a remote parking lot, capable of handling the passenger flow, a cutting edge flight information display system, and the network infrastructure to accomplish their goals.

The Solution



The airport turned to Com-Net Software, and a local RM Williams Construction, to conceive of, design, engineer, and oversee the project. "Com-Net has been our FIDS provider for many years and they successfully deployed our curbside LED signs in 2003 with RM Williams, so we were comfortable working with them as a design-build team again," said Jones.

The design called for a structure capable of supporting four 80 x 256 monochrome LED signs. Each sign was five feet high and ten feet long, each weighing approximately 1,100 pounds. The combined structure also

needed to be able to sustain hurricane force winds. The resulting design was 25 feet tall and 44 feet wide. It required tons of steel and is set in concrete pillars that are 4 feet wide and 24 feet deep. Network connectivity was delivered via multi mode fiber to a custom network equipment rack. The rack is environmentally controlled to maximize circulation and minimize heat and moisture.

Once installed, the LED signs were integrated into Com-Net's ECLIPSE Flight Information Display System. The signs have a capacity of 39 flights so Com-Net Developers programmed the flight information to rotate when the number of flights exceeds that number. Once a flight arrives, a time, 20-minutes into the future displays, to notify meeters and greeters of how long it will be until they are ready to proceed to curbside to retrieve their passenger. Once the displayed time and current time match, a "Ready



for Pickup" status and a baggage claim number displays. "We spent a lot of time trying to understand the average time it took passengers to deplane, retrieve their bags and proceed to curbside", said Weaver, "Twenty minutes has worked out well," she continued.

Tampa also dedicated a sign to visual paging allowing them to broadcast important information to the remote lot. "We wanted the ability to send information to meeters and greeters such as the phone number for our Interactive Voice Response (IVR) System, said Kiel Bartakov, Deputy Director of IT. Additionally, "the flexibility of Com-Net's ECLIPSE system allows us to programmatically adjust the brightness of the LED signs at night to improve readability and extend the life of the LED signs", said Bartakov.

Results

"The deployment went very well", noted Jones. "The project was completed on time for the March 15, 2006 opening and the results have been much better than we expected." During peak times there are 40-50 cars in the lot at any given time; that's 40-50 cars that are not stacked up at curbside or on the roadway surrounding the airport. Traffic personnel have taken note too. In the past they had to continually chase cars away from the curbside area. Now there is somewhere to send the meeters and greeters where they can wait and relax, rather than having to deal with the uncertainty of where their passengers will be and when they will be there. "Congestion is noticeably better", said Jones, "and customers have been very complimentary. Overall, we consider the project a success."

About Tampa International Airport

Tampa International Airport is located on the central gulf coast of Florida and handles approximately 19 Million passengers annually on 23 commercial airlines, through 60 gates. For more information, [visit www.tampaairport.com](http://www.tampaairport.com).

About Com-Net Software

Com-Net Software is a leading provider of Audio-Visual Customer Communication Systems for the transportation, retail, hospitality, education and healthcare industries. A division of Signature Technologies, Inc., Com-Net is a market leader in providing sophisticated turnkey solutions that include hardware, software, installation, maintenance and support throughout North America. For additional information, visit www.comnetsoftware.com or call 1-800-899-2638.