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Technology vet unveils benchmarking tool for biz travel policies

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By Dan Luzadder

If you are in corporate travel management, Rock Blanco -- call him the professor of travel technology -- wants to give you a report card.

Your score, or your "Travel GPA" as Blanco puts it, will be compared with the scores of other corporate travel programs, which in turn can quickly educate users in how their travel policies stack up against their peers in the areas of expense management or efficiency.

"For the most part, it is wide-open out there in the new world of travel management," Blanco said. "We have online competition from entities like Expedia, Travelocity and the supplier Web sites, where travel managers can go directly like a consumer to book travel.

"And it is becoming more of a challenge for travel management companies to their existence. They say they can manage your travel program efficiently, but how do I validate that at any given day, month or year and really know I have some quantitative figure or metric that I can actually measure the performance against?"

Blanco wants to provide the benchmarking, with a grading system that gives travel managers an instant assessment of their travel program.

Blanco, who is CEO of Prime Numbers, the Boston-based parent of TravelGPA, said that TravelGPA.com filled a gap between research-driven analysis and the TravelGPA database, enabling corporations to benchmark their travel policies, determining whether they are too tight, too loose or just right.

"Most of the options out there are research-oriented, like Forrester or Runzheimer or Topaz," Blanco said. "There is nothing else there now, however, that can gather all the information across all barriers, time zones ... and put that in a single source.

"We've said, 'Here is an easy-to-use concept, with a simple, easy-to-use that does what we have all become familiar with throughout our educational life: giving us a report card.'"

The grades result in a score that Blanco said he patterned closely on credit scores generated by credit bureau reporting for individuals.

To generate the data used to run a TravelGPA report card, Blanco taps information collected by his clients: travel management companies that have compiled information on air, hotel, car, budgeting practices and other data directly from their clients.

The program then analyzes that information on an anonymous basis and categorizes it by travel spending, region, business type and other metrics to create the statistical benchmarks.

"The data is coming from the back-office accounting systems of the travel management companies," Blanco said. "Then it comes through an extraction routine that pulls what we need. Because we are working at benchmarking, I don't need all the details found in a traveler's reservation."

Individual clients of the travel management companies get coded based on their profile: their city of operation, their type of business and their annual spending on air, hotel and car. That profile is used to compare them to others of similar characteristics.

Since the data is all statistical and done anonymously, the results don't reveal the names of the other companies in their group.

An environmental-assessment component stands out as unique, Blanco said, and is something he expects to be attractive to companies as emissions concerns continue to play a larger part in corporate travel planning.

"For the environmental component, we hooked up with Native Energy of Vermont, which is a company that has all the metrics and can give you a multiplier by which to analyze exactly how green any trip is," Blanco said.

He said Native Energy collects data in air segments that look at the type of aircraft flown, its fuel efficiency, length of the trip, altitude, nonstop or connection categories, load factors and even how much time was spent on a runway. Similarly appropriate metrics are applied to hotels and ground transportation.

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