Creating the New Connexxus Travel Portal

UC CENTRAL TRAVEL MANAGEMENT
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Project Name
The New Connexxus Travel Program Portal

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Technologies Utilized
SSO (Single Sign-on) via Shibboleth
SAML1/SAML2
Drupal
Google Analytics

Project Timeline
April 01, 2013 – August 9, 2013
Utilization August 2013 – Current

Relevant URLs
www.travel.ucop.edu
http://www.ucop.edu/central-travel-management/
http://www.summitawards.com/

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INTRODUCTION
Connexxus is an award winning, secure web portal for UC’s systemwide travel program. It allows employees access to booking tools, training videos, and informational guides that can help arrange travel for faculty, students, staff, athletic teams, contractors, and guests of UC.

The travel program offers a range of booking options that have access to all UC-negotiated discounts – providing value, flexibility, and convenience for all UC domestic and international travel.

BACKGROUND
Connexxus is easily accessible and available to all UC employees with a UC issued email address via the Single Sign-on (SSO) process, which utilizes Shibboleth and SAML interfaces. Campus intranets and individual campus travel and accounting department pages are linked and easily direct users into the Connexxus portal via the SSO and authentication protocols with Shibboleth. The SSO and authentication process also allows the portal to remain secure by providing increased identity and fraud protection of profile payment options and personal information. The Connexxus interface integrates with both SAML1 and SAML2 platforms, extracts and transfers profile and payroll PPS data file information from each UC campus to third party profile management provider, Trondent. This is a distributed batch job running on the DEM system. UCOP receives all of the interfaces from all the campuses, and then consolidates the data from payroll data and telecom data. The Connexxus and Trondent interface then push these extracted files downstream to the travel management supplier booking tools for UC Travel Center, BCD Travel, and Balboa Travel.

BENEFITS OF THE CONNXEXXUS PORTAL
The purpose of the UC travel program is to support increased systemwide savings and to improve effectiveness of campus spending by increasing bookings within UC-approved rates.

The Connexxus portal promotes this purpose by offering a singular location for all UC-approved booking methods and UC-negotiated rates and benefits. Some of the specific advantages of the portal include:

- Supporting campus finance with the ability to utilize a campus paid option for airfare and corporate card;
- Automatic application of UC travel insurance and the ability to track traveler location through the data depository intelligence reports. This allows for a decrease in risk, increase in security, and provide cost avoidance during an emergency or world event while UC travelers are on the road on campus business;
- Time management by offering training and reference materials, including Central Travel Office business hours support for travelers and arrangers who may have questions/issues with the program;
• Tracking campus sustainability - measured by most UC-suppliers – since air travel emissions contribute to UC’s Scope 3 GHG emissions. While the purpose of the travel program is to reduce air travel costs, Connexxus data has been helpful in gauging the amount of each campus’ air travel and thus estimate GHG. Connexxus suppliers provide quarterly reports of air travel CO2 emissions which enable campuses to begin to understand the magnitude of their air travel emissions.

Savings garnered by the travel program can help stretch departmental funds further and perhaps send more students on research trips, extend faculty time in the field, or even reallocate funds towards other quality patient care programs as needed.

PORTAL HISTORY
The initial portal was difficult to navigate as it was very content heavy, with no organizational flow and required users to leave the portal or continually go back to a main page. It contained outdated information which was difficult to update with modifications sometimes taking months to occur. The portal design was deeply outdated with an antiquated design and feel and a complicated interface that hid many of the programs features and benefits, forcing the perception that the program was unreliable, confusing and that the portal was inefficient and non-competitive with commercial sites.

NEED FOR CHANGE
Early in 2013 the UC Travel Council, a group comprised of representatives from all UC campuses, labs, and medical centers responsible for making decisions, providing oversight and advice to the travel program, recognized the need for the Connexxus travel portal to become competitive with commercial booking sites and allow for mobile capabilities, as paramount. As such, a complete overhaul of the Connexxus portal was agreed upon.

CHALLENGES and APPROACH
The challenge in redesigning Connexxus was to forgo the conventional approach of implementing stricter, tighter policy. Instead the Central Travel Office and Travel Council chose to take an innovative approach, by utilizing technology and renovating the portal to accomplish their goal of increasing adoption and overall revenue of the travel program.

It was acknowledged early on in the process that implementing innovative techniques, modern technology, and incorporating mobile optimization, the perception of the entire program could be transformed, to not only retain current users, but attract new users as well. This creative approach would also allow the opportunity to re-launch not only the Connexxus portal, but the entire travel program.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS
Creating the new Connexxus portal was a collaborative effort by all members of the UC Travel Council consisting of representatives from all campuses, medical centers and labs, along with input from the UC traveling community, to create a highly functional, state-of-the-art and user friendly tool to book university travel. A technology sub-committee was suggested and volunteers were taken from all campuses to form this new special project committee to discuss issues, interview, determine and select appropriate web designing firms to best fit the culture, technology requirements, challenges, and overall goals of the project at hand, which would ultimately be the catalyst to re-launch the entire travel program.
Once web designing firms were narrowed down to three, the firms or individuals were invited to present their past endeavors, projects, and ideas to all Travel Council members and project sponsor Peter Taylor, former UC CFO, for consensus and approval of a final successful candidate.

Trinet Solutions, Inc. a web development firm from Irvine, California was unanimously voted to handle the re-design project, due to their creative approach and background knowledge in dealing with projects of similar scope and technical demand. Trinet, a local well known firm, had won several industry awards and successfully handled projects at UCI in the past.

The technology sub-committee then began a rigorous design selection process, in which all user types or personas, were identified specifically by their booking site issues and needs, which included power users and new users, faculty, arrangers for students, athletic groups, and those just seeking travel related information. Over a two month period design boards and wireframes were discussed, selected and finally narrowed down again to three final designs to present to the Travel Council for final input and selections. The winning design and wireframe became what is now the current Connexxus portal. New logos, color themes, personas and motto, along with overall functionality were phases that were voted on and selected by all Travel Council members.

Once all selections were determined, implementation began with faculty groups and top travel and arranger groups solicited to test the new portal and provide feedback. The full testing group of over 300 campus faculty and staff were crucial to the validating process of the new portal. New wireframes, authentication process, and URLs required collaboration not only with the Travel Council and Trinet Solutions, but also with the program’s agency suppliers. After all the feedback was considered and selections finalized, the new portal populated with relevant links, videos, and enhanced features and was launched in mid-August 2013.

**KEY OBJECTIVES and KPIs**
The Travel Council determined key objectives for the new portal site were to increase utilization and revenue of the entire travel program through Connexxus. The new portal would need to increase intuitive usability to simplify the users’ experience, provide updated resources to educate users on the program and a smoother seamless interface with navigation paths allowing for users to easily find features and information through most device-types, along with the ability to highlight and clearly communicate all of the benefits and true value of the travel program. A key part would be ensuring that users could easily find policy, travel information, FAQs, comparison options, and customer service. A content management system would need to be included which would allow information to easily and quickly be edited by the Central Travel Management staff, along with designs that could be easily modified, to ensure the portal remained a trusted and reliable system that was relevant, fresh and provided up to date travel alerts and program notifications on a regular basis.

**Key performance indicators (KPIs) for the portal were identified as:**

1. Increasing Connexxus air travel spend from 40% to 80% (by 2018)
2. Double the 2012 air transaction rate of 69,000 (by 2018)
3. Increase use of online booking systems from 49% to 75% (by 2018)
4. Increase new users while retaining returning users
5. Decrease bounces from initial homepage information
6. Increase exits to booking tool URLs

**RESULTS**
Connexxus now highlights and prioritizes key content above the fold to decrease the need to scroll down to locate most important information. It also includes eye pleasing white space to visually group items together, making content more readable and easier to focus on. Navigation is strategically positioned with left-left configuration combined with top-top navigation depending on which action the user takes, and also opens external links in a new window so the user does not
leave the portal. This consistent navigation also helps users sort and find content, allows users to easily navigate to other areas of the portal without first returning to the main page, which in turn supports task performance and information, while providing a unified experience.

Key calls to action for each persona are clarified with identifiable icons and corresponding paths to increase the amount of productive time users spend on the portal and the relevant number of pages they visit. Design elements were standardized to provide all type users with again, a *consistent unified experience*, to easily locate the type content each would seek. Functionality was simplified where possible by eliminating previously wasted and unnecessary features, by replacing them with useful tools and highly intuitive and functional features. These include, user-intuitive navigation, breadcrumb tracking, a predictive search widget with full sentence capability, relatable page titles and summaries, downloadable tutorial documents, Vimeo training videos, with both a video and document library.

Additional new features are a full site map at the bottom of each page with index, site comparison and booking option matrices, along with mobile optimized versions of popular pages users may visit while traveling and the ability to conform to multiple devices. A special “Getting Started” page, FAQ, Customer Service section and Contact Us button were created to decrease service issues and increase resolution and response time to any user questions, feedback, or challenges with the program or portal itself. The Contact Us and Feedback features enable the Central Travel Office to continuously solicit comments and act upon them.

The new portal wireframe was built with a Drupal content management system (CMS) that allows for easy access and modifications for admin users to regularly update portal content and travel alerts, keeping it fresh and current. The new CMS also allows for sub-sites of the portal that can be customized for different views for specific campuses and groups. This customization also allows special news feeds and billing or accounting details to vary by campus or user types, without convoluting the entire portal site with information that is focused and specific to only one campus, or group. A user’s campus location is identified via the Single Sign-on (SSO) and authentication process that is integrated into the login process for the portal, allowing the portal to intuitively introduce the user into the proper sub-site path.

The portal project team worked with UCOP IT Services and provider Trinet Solutions, to ensure that the new Connexxus portal was programmed to also be ADA compliant.

**SUCCESS MEASUREMENTS**

Google analytics has been incorporated fully to help track total site visits, new and returning visitors, unique and repeat sessions, top pages visited, exit pages and bounce rates. Analytics also provide data on site penetration and navigation paths, which can be drilled down to each campus location. These analytics are instrumental in determining project success
and provide assistance to keep the portal relevant and insight as to where modifications and new recommendations are needed.

Analytics revealed that within 4 months of launch the website had over 54,000 visits, performance had increased 32% in unique traffic visits and had an estimated 4% increase in travel spend through the sites. The bounce rate also decreased to 26.8%, depicting an increase in user satisfaction and usability.

Feedback from users and survey results were outstanding. The new portal was hugely adopted and was receiving rave reviews.

Year-over-year analytics still reflect an increase in site traffic and project success. Site statistics are showing an increase of 33.6% in total sessions or visits, a 31.6% increase in new users and a 21.4% increase in page views. Over 25% of these sessions remain unique or new.

Average site visit duration remains high at over 5 minute’s average per session – this attributed to the additional content available to users and the fact that most leave the site to book online. This fact is supported by specific page visit stats as well as by exit page stats and timeouts. The average visit for new visitors at 5.45 minutes and return visitors at 4.48 minutes also indicates both type users are fully engaged.

Behavior flow reports confirm this as well, with most visitors penetrating to third level pages. New content created specifically to ease the burden of hunting for information is well used with high page view duration times. The average bounce rate remains consistently low at 26%, with new visitors bounce rate averaging only 8.88% compared to repeat visitors bounce rate of 33.0%, most exiting to the booking tools.

Connexxus campus utilization for 2012 prior to the new portal launch was 39.39%, post launch 2013 program utilization increased to 39.68% after only 4 months, a YOY increase of 0.74%. Year-over-year 2013 to 2014 program annual evaluation and campus utilization reports reflected a 17.09% increase in program adoption.

SAVINGS
Total Program Savings for CY 2014 reflected over $15M and represent a 44.09% increase in year-over-year savings. See Connexxus YOY Comparison table below for full savings achieved plus potential savings at full participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>Year-over-Year Changes</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utilization Level</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>17.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Volume</td>
<td>$35,816,488</td>
<td>$42,614,178</td>
<td>$6,797,690</td>
<td>18.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Transactions</td>
<td>59,994</td>
<td>90,262</td>
<td>20,268</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Booking %</td>
<td>53.20%</td>
<td>58.00%</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
<td>9.02%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**SAVINGS SUMMARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>$10,600,952</th>
<th>$15,274,624</th>
<th>$4,673,672</th>
<th>44.09%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airline Savings</td>
<td>$7,333,130</td>
<td>$11,890,266</td>
<td>$4,557,136</td>
<td>62.10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rental Car Savings</td>
<td>$562,630</td>
<td>$661,994</td>
<td>$100,474</td>
<td>18.05%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hotel Savings</td>
<td>$646,543</td>
<td>$804,442</td>
<td>$157,899</td>
<td>24.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Booking Savings</td>
<td>$946,574</td>
<td>$931,360</td>
<td>$15,214</td>
<td>1.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Bill Bank Revenue</td>
<td>$567,007</td>
<td>$711,562</td>
<td>$144,555</td>
<td>25.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projected*</td>
<td>$18,118,753</td>
<td>$23,097,807</td>
<td>$5,078,854</td>
<td>32.49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Program estimates total savings potential if 80% of all campus air travel was booked on the Connexxus portal. The 80% goal was established by the University Travel Council for achieving high implementation of the Connexxus portal.

SIA EMERGING MEDIA AWARD
The Connexxus portal won the Emerging Media Award from the [Summit International Awards Organization](#).

The Summit International Awards administers three distinguished advertising and marketing award competitions every year to raise awareness of companies and individuals who display exceptional creative and marketing talent. Companies from
more than 50 countries across five continents participate in the awards program and are judged by 70 corporate executives from around the world.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
The Central Travel Office believes the Connexxus Travel Portal redesign is a strong contender for the Sautter Award. One of the primary goals – addressing program utilization – was achieved by leveraging existing and new technologies with the intention to optimize the efficiency and usability of the portal, booking tools, and ultimately the systemwide travel program. As a result of these efforts, Connexxus continues to be the practical and secure gateway to UC's systemwide travel program from anywhere in the world, serving all campus and medical center employees, while ultimately achieving the University's goals of reducing travel spend.