Don't want to be hit for extras on your flight? Bots—and FIU—could help

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If the complexities of booking flights is making you long for a road trip, some robot relief is on the way.

Miami-based Farelogix and Florida International University are creating airline booking technology to deliver "dynamic offers" tailored to the evolving needs of fliers choosier than ever.

"Consumers are starting to dictate what they want in a travel package," Farelogix CEO Jim Davidson said. While travelers once simply searched for the lowest fare, they are now asking for amenities like more leg room, priority boarding and additional carry-on luggage.

More options means a more complicated booking process. That's where Farelogix comes in. It is crunching the data created by those extra choices to suggest air-ticket combinations that will appeal to each passenger.

"Our program will say, 'This looks like a leisure-trip booking.' " That will allow the airline to suggest a flight that might be different from a business flier, he said. "Or if it looks like (the flier) is a college kid, we're going to discount a middle seat to see if they'll buy that."

For airlines, the payoff is in creating more loyal customers. The technology is not about finding ways to increase prices on travelers by jamming in more perks, he said. Instead, he said, customers will be more likely to see more precise results.

To help meet the data demand, Florida International is forming the Data Science for Airlines Informatics (DSAI) program. Students will study and apply advanced predictive analytics specific to the airline industry. The results are enhanced with machine learning and artificial intelligence. Farelogix will serve as the principal corporate partner, working with students to develop new data models for optimizing airline revenue management.

Farelogix has already hired at least five FIU grads. That success led to a longer discussion about setting up the permanent program. Several major carriers have already signed up to use the new data-driven booking technology.

Surprisingly, there has been little academic research to date in this specific field, said Steve Luis, IT and business relations director for FIU's Computing & Information Sciences program.

"Researchers have just started looking at this problem," he said. "It's blue sky."

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