



PLANE



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3 hrs ago

520 weeks of multimodal

With [routeRANK's](#) 10th anniversary this month, it has been as many years that I have been working on multimodal travel planning.

NB This is a viewpoint by Jochen Munding, chairman of [routeRANK](#).

The past five years have been rather different from the first five. During the first half, multimodal was often greeted by “multi-what?” and a fair amount of imagination was required from customers in order to use it.

By now, at routeRANK alone, we have set up more than 50 different customer and partner versions, and gone through over 100 product iterations in the process. Here are six things I have learnt along the way.

10 years to market

I have had the opportunity to experience and learn from not only founding my first business but also being there from the start of a new sector.

I had heard from a colleague, who founded several technology companies in parallel to an academic career, the rule of thumb that it takes 10 years for an invention in the lab to fully arrive in the market.

It always sounded a bit long to me. Of course the timeframe depends on the level of innovation involved and the degree of prevalence for something to be called “in the market”.

The next big thing

In addition to technology, several aspects make multimodal unique. It brings together traditional travel industry products such as air, rental cars and hotels, through channels such as the GDSs, online booking tools, online travel agents, direct connect or meta-search. Other industry products such as rail, coach, shuttles and public transport as well as taxis, fleet and private cars are included, and there are navigation and mapping technologies as well. And increasingly it includes new options such as car sharing and car pooling.

It is part of a megatrend – smart mobility – which is still in its early days.

And unlike other tech-based sectors it comes out of Europe rather than the US. This is true historically – the early initiatives originated from Switzerland, the UK and Germany – with Europe still leading the way today.

Industries converge

The multimodal sector was initially driven by technology start-ups, but established industry players are now involved as well.

It has been our privilege to work with some of them here at routeRANK, including TMCs, online booking tools and expense tools as well as consumer-facing travel websites and portals. What we see is a convergence from one or few modes of transport to also include other modes in an appropriate way.

If you picture the industries corresponding to each mode at the corners, with multimodal at the centre, there is a convergence from the edges to the centre.

So, in response to traveller trends and improved technology, each of the corner industries is reaching out for a more complete mobility offering. This also creates interesting cross-industry competitive situations.

For cars, the convergence brings together the manufacturers with navigation and maps providers. For air, it is websites which include rail connections and nearby airport options.

When door-to-door is not door-to-door

The ability to access multiple relevant hubs – such as nearby airports for flights – is necessary but not really multimodal.

Adding a transfer to the flight booking shouldn't count either, as the airports have to be decided in advance, ignoring what might be better options.

At routeRANK by multimodal we still mean fully and actually multimodal, [as discussed in a previous contribution](#) more than three years ago.

We think the best solutions are still provided by pure multimodal companies. We remain puzzled as to why some established businesses talk up their own pseudo door-to-door features rather than partner with off-the-shelf specialist solutions. And why some travel managers accept the status quo rather than support their travellers' needs end-to-end.

There has been some positioning in the multimodal sector – some have pivoted, some exited, some failed. Some are more visible than others. No doubt, there will be more changes in the future.

Expect diversity

As a result of players from different industries and backgrounds entering the multimodal sector there are different goals and business cases, leading to a variety of products.

At routeRANK, we now set up custom-configured versions and can include several different use cases within each industry. For example, in managed business travel the trip-planning process needs to work in the context of pre-booking (online and offline) and pre-approval, linking to expense management.

Configuration is based on experience from similar cases and adapted according to particular goals, while customization also covers integration with the relevant processes and other tools in the workflow.

As a result, expect many more different multimodal products to come.

Personalization is key

There are significantly more multimodal options for getting between two addresses than there are flight connections between two airports, and multimodal providers need to make sure that users can personalize their options accordingly.

This complexity has always existed, but technology is now making that choice more obvious.

Personalization is also important at the provider level and is very much dependent on the context, the goals and the business cases. As an example, even though we have integrated all the different modes of transport at routeRANK, we make sure to enable the appropriate ones in each case. So we do not have a version where, say, helicopter transfers and bike sharing is simultaneously enabled.

Even customers and partners of the same type often have very different priorities, which means that our solution has to be modular and readily adaptable.

After 100 product iterations, we still make changes to the technology on a regular basis. An earlier example of this was related to the locality of data. Many travel companies are used to having all their unimodal data stored in their own local database. There are different levels, ranging from the most basic information to its actual availability, its actual schedule, its actual price – possibly all in real-time.

But in order to provide the minimum service required by a customer, it is no longer possible to have all data stored locally. And with at least some data remote, this has implications for performance.

So we built a two-step search – also the subject of one of the four patents we've been granted – which initially displays basic results quickly, and then updates them with real-time information as data comes back from the relevant underlying systems.

I look forward to the next 520 weeks of multimodal. What do you think they will bring?

NB This is a viewpoint by Jochen Munding, chairman of [routeRANK](#).

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