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Why boarding-pass design never really took off

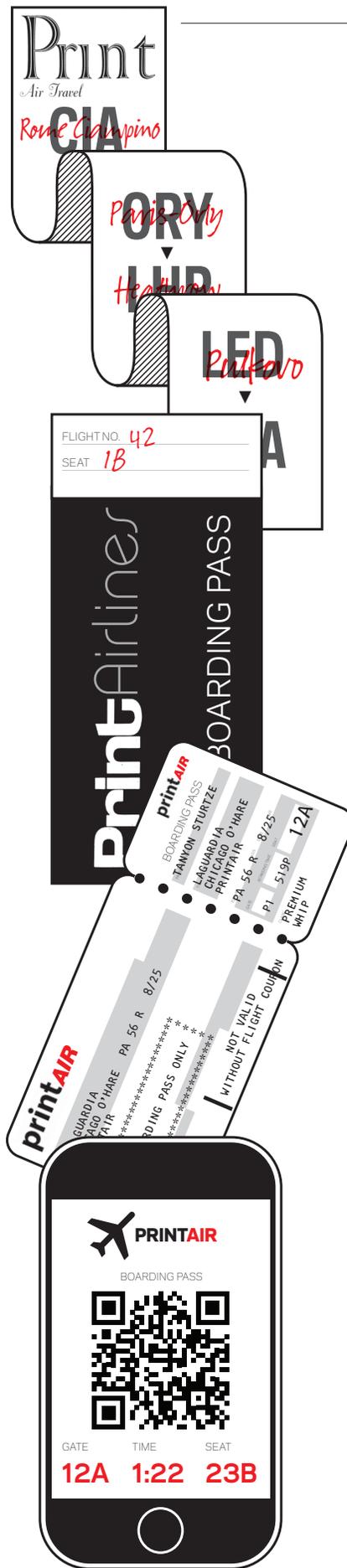
By Steven Heller

Last February, Delta unveiled a redesign of its boarding passes that, the airline said, “is more intuitive and easier to read, with all your flight information more neatly organized.” For many observers, however, the improvements were too little, too late—not least because the job had already been done back in 2010, when an enterprising designer named Tyler Thompson launched the website Boarding Pass/Fail to show off the many ways that Delta and other airlines could clean up these invariably cluttered documents.

In the meantime, the physical boarding pass has been rendered obsolete by mobile-phone versions. Still, before they disappear entirely, it’s worth asking: How did the boarding pass evolve into such a confusing mess in the first place?

At the dawn of commercial aviation, passengers generally made reservations by telephone. Tickets, which were standardized around 1936 under the auspices of the Air Transport Association, looked more like receipts; they were lengths of paper detailing every leg of the trip. American Airlines was the first to use carbon paper to speed up the ticket-writing process. But seats weren’t assigned until you arrived at the gate, and the necessary boarding document was usually only the appropriate portion of the ticket—if that.

Who first introduced boarding passes is unclear, but a patent filed by the Burroughs Corporation for a “data processing system for automatic, on-line checking of



numbered reservations” suggests that they existed at least as early as 1968. Subsequent patents recognized digital systems for “issuing airline boarding passes, while effecting aircraft seat assignments” (1973) and, later, for doing so “without the intervention of any ticket agent” (1981).

How did these early boarding passes look? Not great. Some were printed with what looked like an IBM “ball font”; others used a more primitive computer type. And prior to the late 1980s, most seat numbers were either handwritten on the pass or printed on an analog output device. In other cases, flight attendants managed seat assignments on a chart using sticky-backed numerals, which would then be stuck onto the reverse side of tickets.

Seat assignment eventually became automated—but even as technology evolved, boarding-pass design never really progressed beyond its rudimentary origins. As it turns out, this is at least partly due to the crummy printers at airport check-in counters. The agency that headed Delta’s redesign discovered that many of these machines are quick to overheat and jam. Thus, even if airlines had wanted to improve boarding-pass design with images or large blocks of color, the on-the-ground technology would have made it impractical.

Now, of course, fliers can print their own passes at home or opt for digital tickets transmitted to a cell phone or other portable device. Indeed, some airlines will even charge extra if you’d like an agent to print an old-fashioned boarding pass for you—which, given its still-lacking look and feel, you probably don’t. ■