You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet!
By Dr. Richard Kelley

This weekend, O‘ahu’s Punahou School is putting on its annual Carnival. It is a hectic, colorful collection of rides, booths, games, food, crafts and shows, which raises funds to help pay the tuition for hundreds of students. As at most carnivals, at every turn one is attracted by the lights, noise and shouts of people trying to get you to their booths, perhaps using the old “carny” (carnival) call, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

That is what I felt like in Los Angeles last week when I attended a briefing by a group of technology companies that are developing new software that will shape the direction of Travel & Tourism in the near future and for many years to come.

It is hard to believe how fast things are moving.

- It has been less than 20 years since companies like CompuServe, Prodigy and America Online began providing dial-up access to the Internet.
- It has been less than 15 years since the first “smart phones” blended computer technology, Internet access and telephone service into a small instrument you can hold in the palm of your hand.
- It was just nine years ago, in January 2004, when Mark Zuckerberg began writing the code for a service he called “thefacebook,” according to The Harvard Crimson.

Since then an unbelievable amount of data about almost everything has been accumulated and organized. It is now available to anyone who wants to look for it. To get an idea of what is out there, try to do an Internet search on your own name or street address.

Every company you do business with and every airline you fly on has data about you and all of its customers. Every time you do a search of the Internet, the search engine you use knows where you have been. Every time you use a social media service such as Facebook, Twitter, etc., those companies know what you are interested in and who your friends are. Add to that all the data available to the public through government databases, and you’ll begin to understand the staggering amount of information available.

New technology companies are focusing on making this information available to industry so they can target sales and marketing efforts to particular customers or potential customers with unbelievable specificity, accuracy and relevancy.

For example, Adara Media (www.adaramedia.com), based in Silicon Valley near San Francisco, has partnered with hotel companies, airlines, travel booking/search sites and others to access their databases. For a fee, Adara claims it will deliver its subscribers the names and contact numbers of potential customers qualified by, say, previous travel patterns, use of search engines to get information about a particular geographic area or topic, and any number of other criteria.

New Brand Analytics (www.newbrandanalytics.com), based in Washington, D.C., has developed software that allows restaurants and hotels to analyze and act on all forms of customer feedback across the Internet and hundreds of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Yelp and TripAdvisor.

Goodbye to the old-fashioned customer surveys sent out by hotels for eons. Today, customers start sharing their impressions of all components of Travel & Tourism as soon as they take their seat at a restaurant or arrive at a hotel. This information goes to friends, families and, often, millions of total strangers through social media. Photos are posted on these same sites or on visual organizers such as Shutterfly, Flickr and Snapfish.

New Brand Analytics helps its subscribers gather, organize, understand and take action on almost every...
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part of their operations – menu selections, room décor, service, etc.

HotelMe (www.hotelme.com), another Washington, D.C., company, has developed software which it claims will “help consumers make more informed travel decisions based on actual stays.” The company postulates that the single most critical issue facing the travel industry today is credibility. Why? Because anyone with a valid email address can post a positive or negative review of a hotel without actually having been there. HotelMe suggests that nearly 30 percent of online reviews are thus not genuine – perhaps planted by people interested in creating a favorable or unfavorable impression. HotelMe addresses this concern by verifying that the reviewer did actually stay at the hotel. By teaming with USA Today and Gannett as well as 25 hotel brands, it targets specific customers for sales offers, news and social media contacts.

Nor1 (www.nor1.com), another Silicon Valley company, has focused on the science of pricing and merchandizing to give hotels a way to maximize revenues and improve the guest experience by “upselling.” It is based on knowledge of the guest gathered through various Internet databases.

Revinate (www.revinate.com), located in San Francisco, was not represented at the conference I attended but might well have been included. It offers a product that we use at Outrigger to sort and monitor customer reviews on sites such as TripAdvisor, Twitter and Facebook.

At the conference, many other leading-edge technology companies presented information about their companies and products. By the end of the day, I felt exhausted and wondered if I was like the guy who was trying to get a sip of water from a fire hose.

In the April 28, 2012, edition of Saturday Briefing, I described our company’s early efforts to use technology to improve our operations (http://tinyurl.com/SB042812) and how computers were so strongly opposed by my father, Outrigger founder Roy Kelley.

I wish Roy could be with us today. I’ll bet he would say something like, “Well, Richard, you’ve come a long way with computers but I still say they are the creation of the devil.”

My answer, of course, would be, “Dad, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

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