What’s Up, Doc?
By Dr. Richard Kelley

During the first six months of this year, I have been sitting in an airplane seat a great deal, traveling for both business and pleasure. The thing that has struck me the most is that despite the economic challenges and many unsettling events taking place around the world, airports seem busier and aircraft more crowded than ever. What’s going on?

There is no question that the number of people flying for both personal and business reasons has grown significantly. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), nearly 3 billion people used air transport in 2012, up 5.5 percent since 2011, and that number is expected to double, reaching 6 billion annually by 2030.

The Asia-Pacific region was the world’s largest air transport market in 2012 with a 30 percent share of global revenue passenger kilometers (RPK). This means that 30 percent of the world’s airline business took place in Asia-Pacific skies – lots of people paying to fly lots of miles to, from and within the region.

Our company has responded to this thriving marketplace by stepping up its investments in the greater Asia-Pacific area, including the recent acquisition of a property on Mauritius, 2,900 miles (4,700 kilometers) southwest of Mumbai, India, which will reopen as an Outrigger resort later this year.

Is Outrigger leaving Hawai’i? Absolutely NOT!
However, like all other major hotel companies, we are diversifying and learning new things in new locations. This can mean new business for Hawai’i and new opportunities for members of our ‘ohana, wherever they work.

But Hawai’i, and the companies serving Travel & Tourism to and from our state, will have to change too. And that thought brings me back to the airlines.

Flying internationally, as I have done so much this year, it does not take long to appreciate the relative luxury and comfort of flying on most international routes. It’s getting better every day. That’s the fruit of competition!

At the same time, the experience of flying a domestic route on U.S.–based airlines has generally gone downhill, particularly on the routes to Hawai’i. Seat width, room between rows and the ability to lean your seat back have all been squeezed year after year.

That must change and the change must come soon because one way or another there will be international competition on U.S. domestic routes before too long.

Very recently, Travel + Leisure magazine announced the “Top Domestic Airline” in the United States, based on reader surveys. Virgin America won the award for the sixth consecutive year.

Virgin America technically qualifies as a “domestic” U.S. airline, but the company has its roots in the mind of Sir Richard Branson who was born in 1950 in London, England, and still calls the United Kingdom home.

Branson’s global airline, Virgin Atlantic, operates between the United Kingdom and North America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australia from its bases at London’s Gatwick and Heathrow airports. It began domestic flights within the UK three months ago, at the end of March.

I predict that some day a Virgin-affiliated airline will serve Hawai’i! Then you will see all competing airlines serving Hawai’i suddenly return to the “good old days” when, under the leadership of Waipahu, Hawai’i-born William A. Patterson, Hawai’i was United Airline’s “little corner of the world” and the party atmosphere aboard the United and Pan Am planes serving Hawai’i truly made “getting there half the fun.” That, in turn, will boost Hawai’i’s economy and offer increased job opportunities in many ways.

These are just a couple of thoughts and examples of how the world, particularly the world of Travel & Tourism, is changing at a faster and faster rate.

What’s my advice to the members of our ‘ohana?

Be prepared for more change in the coming years, whether we like it or not! It’s far beyond our control.

And, remember well the famous words of Louis Pasteur – “Chance favors only the prepared mind.”