



From Content Complexity to Connected Retailing: 7 Transformations Redefining Travel in 2026 -- Led by the Rise of Agentic AI

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SOUTHLAKE, Texas, Dec. 8, 2025 /PRNewswire/ -- As consumers fill their carts this season, the travel industry is contending with its own retail rush. But instead of gadgets, gizmos, and goodies, it's all about offers, ancillaries, and airfares.

The industry seems to be at an inflection point: abundant content and data, coupled with mounting complexity. From generative AI and conversational commerce to modern payments, 2025 has been a year of transformation aimed at tackling that complexity. Entering 2026, the industry is poised to shift from "more" to "more meaningful," from content overload to connected retailing built on intelligence, curation, and trust.

Enterprise SaaS leader Sabre Corporation (NASDAQ: SABR) expects 2026 to bring a full-tilt lean into these emerging shifts, as AI-driven personalization, seamless automation, and comprehensive payment solutions redefine the traveler experience.

Let's take a look at the 7 travel retailing trends we'll be saying goodbye to as 2025 draws to a close, and what to say hello to in 2026...

Trend 1: *Goodbye Static Chat, Hello Agentic Actions*

In 2026, Generative AI will no longer be the shiny new experiment – it's part of everyday life and workflows, reshaping the inspiration phase of travel. [Recent](#) data show 80% of travelers are already using AI tools for travel planning and 65% prefer brands that use AI to personalize experiences.

But, if 2025 was the year GenAI became the norm, 2026 is the year of agentic intelligence – where systems not only suggest and assist with travel plans, but act based on user preferences. While GenAI chatbots have shown the potential, it's agentic AI that will eliminate friction between traveler intent and fulfillment.

The next step? Agentic systems that take autonomous actions on behalf of users – booking, rebooking, or optimizing trips in real time – all within governed frameworks. [Sabre's first-to-market agentic APIs and Model Context Protocol \(MCP\) translator](#) will accelerate this shift, enabling agentic AI to understand the complex language of travel technology. Next year will bring endless opportunities to transform travel using agentic AI – imagine an Irregular Operations Call-Centre Proxy Agent that waits on hold with an airline and secures a same-day rebooking, an Expense Filing Agent that submits corporate travel reports, or even a Hotel Ops Agent that confirms a late arrival and arranges oat milk in your coffee for breakfast. The possibilities for automated action are endless.

In 2026, we'll start to realize the true power of agentic AI, which goes way beyond traditional chatbots. It augments human expertise, orchestrating end-to-end tasks, automating repetitive work, accelerating time-consuming complex jobs, and unlocking insights from fragmented data to create seamless, personalized journeys. Imagine opening a simple chat and asking for everything you need for a trip, the date of the event, a hotel within walking distance, flights that arrive in time, seats you prefer, and a one-click checkout. No juggling tabs, no piecing together details, just a conversation that becomes an itinerary. This is not a far-off idea. It is the kind of AI-powered experience Sabre is building and demonstrating today and will see broad adoption in 2026.

For companies feeling the crunch of needing to implement agentic AI but looking for a little guidance, Sabre is offering two resources. Check out [Sabre's Agentic Blueprint: A practical guide to building AI](#), and look for *Agentic U*, a training program led by in-house experts to help empower customers and partners accelerate towards an agentic future.

Trend 2: *Goodbye Content Chaos, Hello Connected Retailing*

If 2025 had a defining theme, it was content fragmentation. The industry reached a tipping point this year, with travel sellers managing more sources than ever before – from New Distribution Capability (NDC) and Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs) to direct connects and aggregators. For many, this created content chaos: too many channels, too little consistency, and rising complexity for both sellers and suppliers – and ultimately, travelers.

In a [Sabre-commissioned global survey](#), most travel agencies reported managing four or more connections, driving up costs and undermining customer experience. Yet amid the noise, a clear need has emerged – simplification and unification. More than 80% of agencies said they want unified content access through a single platform.

In 2025, Sabre responded with SabreMosaic™ Travel Marketplace, bringing together the industry's widest breadth of travel content in one cloud-native, AI-infused place. SabreMosaic Travel Marketplace is made up of industry leading live NDC airline content, as well as offers from over 150 LCCs, traditional airline content, two million lodging options and over 70 car and rail providers. Even more content and capabilities are coming in 2026 – helping agencies turn fragmentation into seamless workflows.

Trend 3: *Goodbye NDC as Emerging, Hello NDC as Expected*

NDC has previously been the buzzword of airline retailing – new, optional, experimental. What was novel is now normal. [With two-thirds of airlines implementing the standard](#), NDC is no longer a competitive differentiator; it has become a baseline expectation for modern airline retailing.

In 2026, the industry says goodbye to the idea of NDC as a standalone channel. The era of separate workflows, bespoke servicing processes and fragmented integrations is giving way to a connected approach that Sabre has long been leading, where agencies can shop, book and service NDC offers alongside traditional and low-cost carrier content. The shift signals a broader maturity: NDC is no longer a siloed experiment, but an integrated part of the retailing ecosystem that supports richer, data-driven offers without adding operational complexity.

The shift isn't just about more airlines going live – it's about the ecosystem finally having the capabilities that make NDC workable at scale. Agencies have been clear: for NDC to be genuinely compelling, three things must be in place – breadth of content, depth of capabilities, and the ability to run efficient, end-to-end workflows.

Over the past year, the industry has made substantial progress on all three. Sabre has an industry-leading number of live NDC airlines, currently at 42. The foundational capabilities agencies need to shop, book and service NDC offers – particularly robust servicing functionality – are now in place. At

the same time, NDC is becoming tightly connected to the next wave of airline retailing innovation. Offer and Order concepts are moving rapidly from vision to possibility to practice, enabling carriers to think beyond distribution and towards more holistic offer management. Meanwhile, new technical enablers are emerging. One example is the rise of NDC caching solutions which will help agencies navigate airline-imposed look-to-book limits (more on that in #5) and support smarter, more efficient "intelligent shopping" strategies.

Another important evolution is the rise of NDC-IT as a bridge technology for airlines moving toward full Offer and Order-based retailing. NDC-IT gives carriers a way to expose richer, optimized, real time offers to third parties, even before they fully transition their systems.

Together, these shifts signal that NDC's "emerging" era has formally closed. The conversation is no longer about adoption – it's about optimization. NDC's role in 2026 is not to disrupt the ecosystem but to power it, as part of a more connected, more retail-ready marketplace.

Trend 4: Goodbye Direct-Only Detours, Welcome Back Indirect

For years, some airlines – particularly low-cost and hybrid carriers – carved their own paths outside the indirect channel, experimenting with alternative distribution models and direct-connect strategies. Others limited their indirect participation in pursuit of supposed cost savings or control. But, as travel retailing has evolved, so too has the realization that visibility, scale, and value matter.

In 2026, we're seeing a clear shift: a return to the fold for some, a first foray for others. Carriers that once operated on the sidelines are joining or re-joining the broader travel marketplace, integrating their content and retailing capabilities where demand truly lives – in connected platforms used daily by agencies and corporate buyers worldwide.

Sabre's own data and carrier feedback reflect this momentum. Airlines that expand their marketplace participation typically see immediate share gains and improved yield from high-value segments. [Alaska Air Group's decision, for example, to restore full Hawaiian Airlines content to indirect channels](#) and do away with Hawaiian's global distribution system surcharge is already delivering value. Direct-connect models, once seen as "the future," have often proved harder to scale, with higher servicing costs and fragmented customer experiences.

Sabre's expanded LCC and aggregated direct-connect content, launching in early 2026, will further simplify access to content from leading carriers. By offering unified workflows, richer retailing capabilities, and servicing parity across carrier types, Sabre is helping airlines transform distribution from an operational challenge into a strategic advantage.

Trend 5: Goodbye Look-to-Book Busts, Hello Intelligent Shopping

Looking for validation? 2026 will be the year you finally get it.

We've all been there: you search for a flight, find the perfect deal, click through... and suddenly the price has shot up, or the seat has vanished. In 2026, we say goodbye to that – and hello to the offer we want still being available to book.

So, why does this happen? It's because airlines and sellers long relied on caching to keep shopping fast and affordable. To protect system stability and cost, airlines impose strict Look-to-Book (LTB) limits – and when those limits are exceeded, they may throttle or even block agency traffic to safeguard performance. No system can return live, real-time availability for every single search. But, with shopping volumes exploding due to richer content and AI-powered requests, even well-designed caches come under pressure.

This problem has exploded across both direct and indirect channels in recent years. LTB ratios – the difference between searches and actual bookings – are soaring. In the 1990s, the average was around 10:1. By the end of 2025, it's estimated it will have reached 1,000:1 or higher – and could soon reach 20,000:1 or even 200,000:1 as richer offers and personalization expand exponentially.

But, while AI-driven search activity, together with fragmented content sources, is fueling this look-to-book surge, AI also holds the solution. In 2026, we'll say goodbye to inefficient, one-size-fits-all search models, and hello to predictive, intelligent caching that uses AI to anticipate demand, filter irrelevant results, and deliver real-time accuracy without overloading systems. In 2026, intelligent shopping technology will unify APIs, AI and cache to provide the industry and its travelers with a solution that is not only aware of applicable airline quotas and how to optimize them, but also provides AI-enhanced content validation, ensuring those cached offers that are still visible remain bookable – giving you the validation you need.

The result? Faster responses, lower costs, and a new era of predictive travel retailing.

Pricing and offer construction are undergoing similar transformation. SabreMosaic™ Continuous Revenue Optimizer (CRO) is one example of how airlines are breaking free of rigid fare classes and embracing continuous, classless pricing that adapts to real-time demand. And Sabre's broader offer optimization family of solutions – including Ancillary IQ, Upgrade IQ, and the upcoming Bundle IQ launching in 2026 – brings AI-powered insight to every element of the offer.

Together, these capabilities move the industry to intelligent offer management – where the right traveler gets the right offer at exactly the right time, validated, priced, and ready to book.

Trend 6: Goodbye Back-Office Payments, Hello Embedded Payment Intelligence

For most of the last decade, travel payments were treated like plumbing – essential, invisible, and rarely optimized. In 2026, that stance becomes untenable. Payments step out of the back office and into the retail engine, not as a cost to contain, but as intelligence to compound. The winners won't just process transactions; they'll orchestrate them, turning every authorization into a decision about margin, risk, cash flow, and trust.

Offer and order-based retailing has collapsed the distance between what a traveler sees and how a merchant gets paid. Checkout is now, essentially, an extension of the offer itself. If the offer adapts to a traveler's context, the payment must adapt with it. Anything less introduces friction, higher fees, or lost bookings.

In this new world, payment choice becomes part of the shopping experience, and payment insight becomes part of retail strategy. In 2026, travel providers will embrace payments as an integral product.

The shift is already underway. Payments are no longer a post-booking pain point, but one of the industry's most powerful enablers. Effective payment hubs are emerging as connected systems that simplify operations, reduce fraud, unlock global flexibility, and enrich the traveler experience. Virtual cards, digital wallets, and real-time APIs are transforming payments from a cost center into a driver of trust, transparency, and seamless retailing.

Sabre is rapidly accelerating that evolution through Sabre Payments – a unified fintech hub processing more than \$20B in transactions annually. It streamlines travel payments processes for buyers and suppliers while offering value-add financial services.

Trend 7: Goodbye Locked-In Legacy, Hello Open, Modular Future

For decades, airlines have been locked into closed systems, rigid fare structures, and tightly coupled technology stacks that dictated how they priced, sold, and serviced travel. In 2026, that era ends – the new future is open, modular, flexible, and built for constant optimization.

Airlines are no longer locked into monolithic systems or all-or-nothing upgrades. Instead, they're embracing componentized, best-of-breed retailing architecture that allows them to modernize at their own pace, piece by piece, without being dependent on any single platform or vendor. This shift to openness is driven by the need to give airlines better control over how they create, price, distribute, and fulfill modern offers – including the ability to blend third-party content, dynamic products, and ancillary services into unified, service-ready orders – all optimized for a world where customer expectations and competitive dynamics change by the minute.

In this new era, modularity becomes the backbone of Offer and Order transformation. Airlines are increasingly adopting an architecture that mirrors [IATA's emerging reference frameworks](#), where product catalog, offer management, order management, delivery, payment, and settlement are interoperable building blocks, not locked components.

2025 delivered a major proof point for this impending shift. During IATA's Modularity Proof-of-Concept program – which involves multi-vendor collaboration to demonstrate how different components can work together for an end-to-end experience – Sabre demonstrated true interoperability in action. It showcased the ability to search, sell, and fulfill a hybrid air-and-hotel bundle, including dynamic seat pricing, with full payment and settlement flow via ONE order. This proof of concept was built collaboratively with leading ecosystem partners, including Google, Hyatt Hotels, Lufthansa Systems, and CellPoint Digital, illustrating exactly how airlines can assemble best-of-breed components across the entire retailing lifecycle.

Together, these shifts mean airlines are no longer defined by systems they may have chosen decades ago – but by the ecosystems they choose to build now.

Looking Ahead

As we head into 2026, the direction is clear: the travel ecosystem is moving from fragmentation to flow – from disparate content to connected offers, from conversation to action, from data overload to intelligent automation, and from siloed systems to seamless retailing.

It's a future built on integration, intelligence, and intent – where AI technology powers smarter decisions, seamless journeys, and stronger connections across the travel ecosystem. Here's to putting all of that into our 2026 shopping cart!

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About Sabre Corporation

Sabre Corporation is a leading software and technology company that powers the global travel industry, serving a broad spectrum of travel businesses including airlines, hoteliers, travel agencies and other suppliers. The company provides retailing, distribution and fulfilment solutions that enable its clients to operate more efficiently, generate revenue and offer personalised travel experiences. Through its leading travel marketplace, Sabre connects travel suppliers with buyers worldwide. Headquartered in Southlake, Texas, USA, Sabre serves customers in over 160 countries. www.sabre.com

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