Jeremy Bull’s only travel experience before he started Hillgate Travel in 1982 was as a sometimes-unhappy customer of other travel management services.

An advertising executive, Bull was a regular First-Class business traveller to destinations all over the world. He experienced mediocre service and lack of attention to detail first hand. A hotel didn’t have the promised services. He didn’t get the right seat on a plane. A car service wasn’t reliable enough.

“I was good at client-facing service and delivery in advertising,” Bull says. “So I set out to emulate that in travel.”

The venerable Wall Street firm Lehman Brothers was his first big customer. The company’s prior vendor couldn’t provide pre-trip reporting. Hillgate could, and several other financial services companies soon followed.

Hillgate has grown into one of the United Kingdom’s largest privately-owned travel management companies. It specializes in bespoke services for experienced business travellers. Clients include the UK Houses of Parliament, media moguls, law firms and financial services firms.

Bull and his executive team feel they’re able to deliver top notch service because they’ve built Hillgate on a foundation of good information management systems. And Sabre has been a key component of these systems.

HIGH TECH, HIGH TOUCH

“Technology has been a differentiator from day one,” said Bull, who serves as Chairman. Hillgate’s team early on designed proprietary systems to handle the pre-trip reporting clients wanted.

“We believe in being masters of our own destiny,” Bull said. “This means we like to design systems specific to our own needs. It’s a competitive advantage.”

For the first six years, Hillgate relied on a competitor of Sabre. This system went down in December 1987 for 20 days and “no one seemed to care,” said Bull. He went looking for a more responsive GDS and selected Sabre.

At that time, Hillgate was one of the first travel management companies in Europe to use Sabre. Today, Hillgate uses Sabre Red Workspace® as its primary desktop application for operations. Hillgate has also developed its own self-booking tool as well as other impressive applications including a pre-trip approval application and quality assurance application. They use Sabre Web Services® to power these proprietary tools.

The ease of integration has compelled Hillgate to build all of its subsequent technology using Sabre Web Services.

“We find the Sabre desktop application and Sabre Web Services easy to use, quite intuitive, and reliable. And the level of support is much higher than other GDS vendors.”

Jeremy Bull
Chairman
Hillgate Travel

“We find the Sabre desktop application and Sabre Web Services easy to use, quite intuitive, and reliable. And the level of support is much higher than other GDS vendors.”

Jeremy Bull
Chairman
Hillgate Travel

The Sabre interface has helped Hillgate continually improve its offerings. In recent years, they’ve developed a travel approval system for use with smartphones, and also became the first travel management company in the UK to be fully Payment Card Industry (PCI) compliant.

Hillgate Travel on quest for perpetual improvement
SABRE SOLUTIONS, IN-DEPTH CONSULTING ENGAGEMENT BOOST OPERATING EFFICIENCIES AND REVENUE OPPORTUNITIES
AN ENDURING TRAVEL PARTNERSHIP

To make sure the company's operations and systems continue to stand up to new market challenges, Bull brought in Anthony Rissbrook as Managing Director to provide additional leadership and operational expertise. Rissbrook embarked on an assessment of all processes and procedures. His initial review identified some potential opportunities for improvement.

“We weren’t factoring profitability and efficiency into some of the choices we offered,” said Rissbrook. “We wanted to find smarter ways of providing even greater service and selection.”

Once Rissbrook shared his efficiency goals with Sabre, a Sabre consulting team was dispatched to assist. The Sabre team interviewed stakeholders in all facets of operations. Sabre also performed an on-the-floor analysis, and time-tracking study for ticketing and itinerary development.

The Sabre effort identified ways Hillgate could realise significant savings through:

- increased automation and streamlining of older scripts;
- re-engineering the approval process to account for exceptions;
- automating quality-control functions; and
- expanding scripts to cross-sell more services.

“Our MI provisioning is as good as it is because of the way we set it up with Sabre,” Rissbrook said. “We need only a small Accounts department to handle this business because everything works so well together.”

The company is also preparing its systems for the advent of more add-on charges, like more desirable seats, more legroom, faster boarding, and extra luggage, for example. Sabre has changed its tools to build in these capabilities, which will make it easier and more profitable for Hillgate, said Rissbrook.

“Challenging business times have brought us even closer with our partners like Sabre,” he said.

And, while technology may be in constant flux, a productive partnership endures.

STAYING AHEAD

CONTROL YOUR DESTINY—
HILLGATE DESIGNS ITS OWN SOFTWARE AND SYSTEMS AND HIRES ITS OWN 24/7 SUPPORT STAFF.

ACKNOWLEDGE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT—THE COMPANY REVIEWS AND REASSESSES REGULARLY TO MAKE SURE ITS OFFERINGS AND ITS SYSTEMS STAY RESPONSIVE.

LISTEN TO FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES—MANY IMPROVEMENTS ORIGINATE FROM SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES, SUCH AS “TOO MANY KEYSTROKES” OR “SCREENS TOO COMPLICATED.”

KEEP STAFF HAPPY—THE AVERAGE TENURE FOR HILLGATE EMPLOYEES IS 7.4 YEARS—WELL ABOVE AVERAGE FOR THE INDUSTRY.