UATP®

Agentic Commerce and the Future of Payments

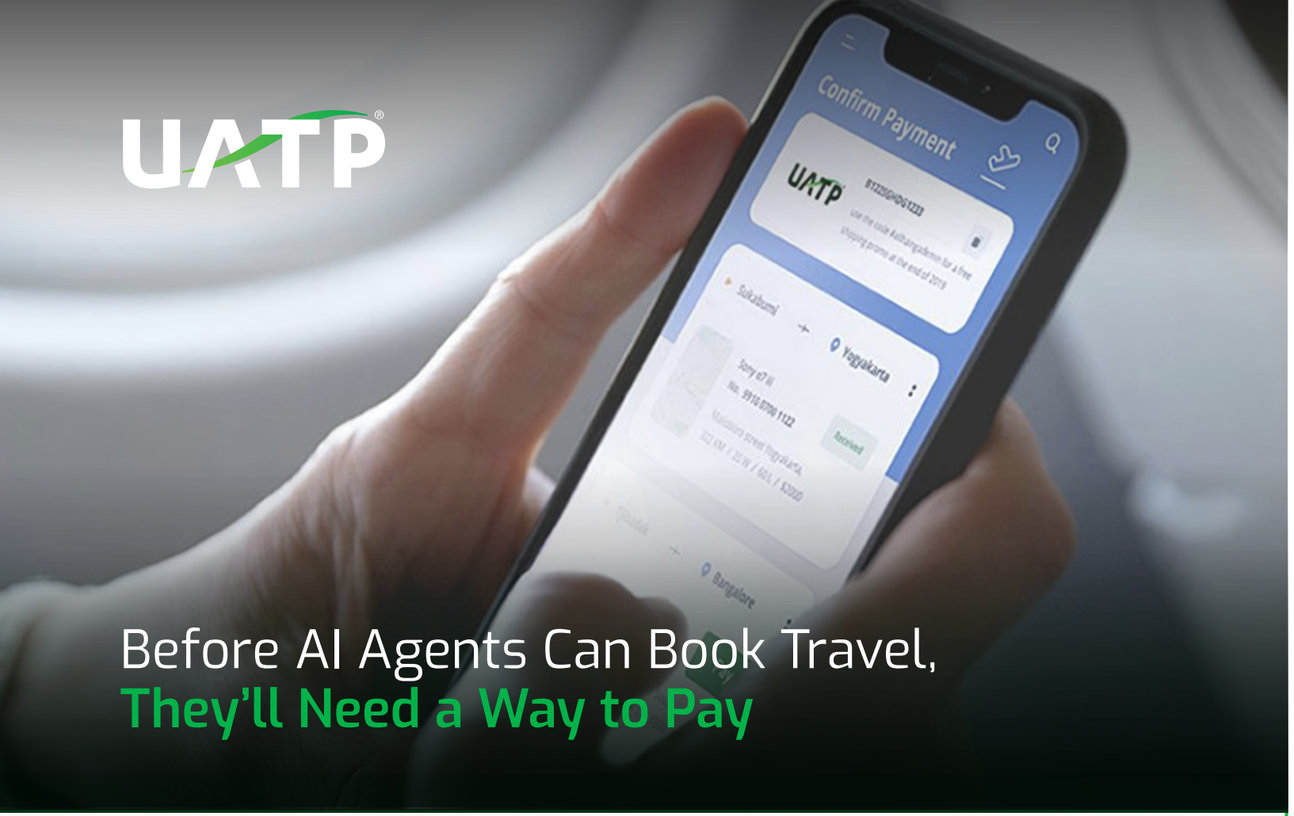
Why Travel Merchants Must Get Payments Right Before AI Agents Take Over

No one knows which agentic model will prevail, but each will depend on payments.

For airlines and travel merchants, capturing agent-generated demand will require having payment infrastructure equipped for new forms of authorization, fraud, liability, and settlement… and adapting to some rules that are yet to be written.



Industry insights from Wendy Ward
Chief Marketing Officer, UATP



Before AI Agents Can Book Travel, They'll Need a Way to Pay

The commercial value of any new travel channel lies in its ability to turn search or intent into a completed, paid booking.

As more travelers plan their trips with the help of a growing number of AI assistants, hotels leverage artificially intelligent algorithms to set room rates, and OTAs use AI models to source travel inventory, it's not an exaggeration to say that the age of AI-enabled travel is upon us. This is also true for payments; airlines and travel merchants have spent the last several years adopting AI to drive back-office efficiencies, and those gains are starting to reach the payment flow. Smart routing and real-time settlement already trim costs and add speed to travel transactions.

The next AI wave — agentic commerce — promises something much larger: agents that search, compare, book, and pay on the traveler's behalf. **McKinsey puts the global prize at $3T to $5T in agent-directed sales by 2030.** That figure, of course, is future-state optimism. What travel merchants see today is much narrower.

Consumers primarily use AI to research far more often than they make purchases with it, while the rails for identity and payment authorization remain immature, fraud moves at machine speed, and meaningful agentic booking gains have yet to arrive.

Ultimately, these developments mean that a travel merchant can't simply build an agentic commerce strategy on top of an unprepared payment stack and expect success. The hype around agentic commerce far outstrips what airlines and other travel merchants can deliver today, as shown by the gap between AI ambition and operational readiness. The entire industry must also grapple with the many fraud and regulatory questions that agent-initiated payments raise.

How agentic commerce will reshape travel payments is still an open question, which is exactly why airlines need their payment strategy established – and the right partnerships in place – before the agents arrive at scale.

AI Is Already in the Payment Flow. Now What?

The airline industry's adoption of AI began in operations, years before agentic booking entered the commercial agenda. AI models were used (and still are) to flag maintenance issues before parts fail and rebook mishandled bags, for example. In 2025, SITA's OptiFlight® solution processed 2.9 million flights for 59 airlines, recommending fuel-efficient climb and cruise profiles.

Another example is its WorldTracer® Auto Reflight solution, which cut baggage reconciliation at Thai Airways from three minutes to just one second. AI is already helping airlines optimize many parts of the business that keep planes moving. AI adoption in commercial and payment functions has been slower, but each is progressing at their own pace.

McKinsey's 2025 Global Payments Report describes payment providers "moving from enabling acceptance to running **autonomous infrastructure**," with smart routing, real-time settlement, automated compliance, and dynamic currency optimization now shaping how transactions flow from merchants to acquirers and settling banks.

AI Applications in Payment Processing

- Fraud Prevention
- Transaction Routing
- Reconciliation
- Settlement
- Insights and Optimization

The intelligence that has trimmed operational costs is now trimming cost and friction within the payment system and the transaction itself.

But cost control is only part of the equation; agentic commerce represents an even larger prize on the revenue side of the ledger.

Rather than assist a human at the checkout stage, an agent discovers the entire trip, assembles it, and pays for it on the traveler's behalf. All within seconds. IDC expects up to **30%** of travel bookings to run through AI agents by 2030.



30%

of travel bookings are likely to be made by AI agents by 2030.

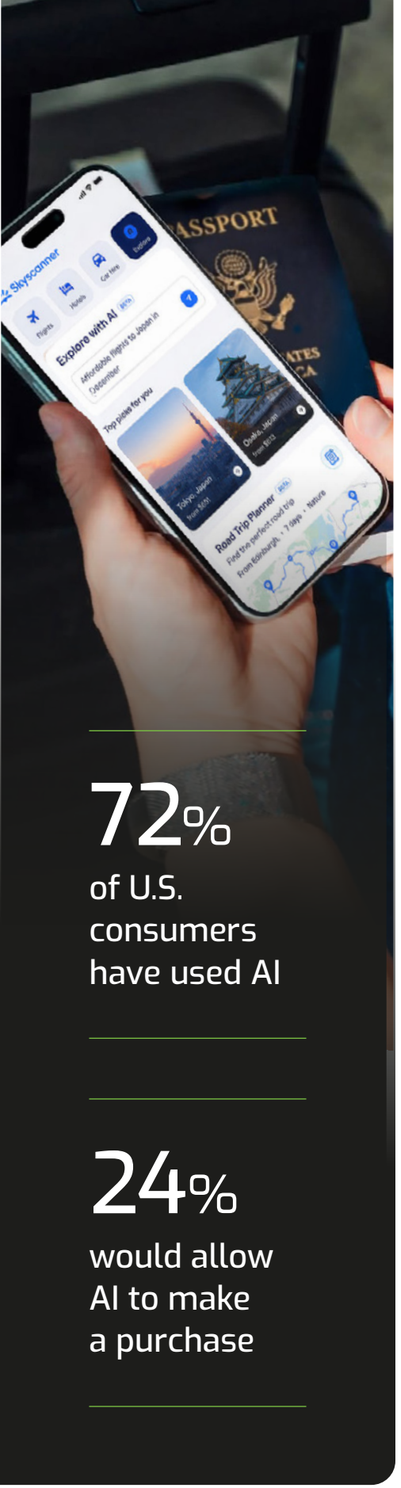
Think about what that number represents, and what it will demand of airlines and travel merchants. A wholesale change in how travel products are marketed and sold, and how demand is met. It will also expose any weakness in the payment layer.

An agent can easily compare fares or rates across a dozen (or more) sources in the time a human reads one screen, but the booking completes only if the airline or travel merchant can authenticate the agent, recognize (and support) the preferred payment method, authorize the payment, settle the transaction, route it efficiently, and reconcile it against the order.

Strip away the payment capability, and the agentic front end can't complete a transaction.

That's the core tension between hype and reality: what agentic travel commerce promises and what airlines and travel merchants can deliver.

And it's the perfect place to begin.



72%
of U.S. consumers have used AI

24%
would allow AI to make a purchase

The Hype and Reality: Agentic Use Cases and Airlines' True Readiness

Demand for AI in shopping is growing, but it's still early. Bain found that 72% of American consumers have used AI in some form, but only 24% would be comfortable using it to make a purchase today. Around half remain cautious about letting an agent handle the entire purchase, from search through payment. Consumers have openly invited AI into the discovery and research phases but have kept it away from their wallets.

Their caution also reflects the current use case centering on decisions, not transactions. McKinsey frames agentic commerce as reshaping **discovery first** and extending into execution later, as the rails for identity, authorization, and payment mature and trust grows.

It seems that AI's influence over what a traveler buys has arrived well ahead of an agent's ability or permission to complete the purchase.

This behavioral pattern shows up more visibly in travel planning and purchasing than in other industries. Virgin Atlantic® became the **first airline** to launch an app inside ChatGPT®, yet the booking loop doesn't close there; payment and the final booking still happen within the airline's own channels.

Skyscanner's® ChatGPT app can handle discovery and service, but they stop short of settled payment. The agent hands the traveler back to the airline or OTA as soon as money is involved.

These are two clear examples of why true agentic travel commerce remains in the realm of prototypes rather than a settled model. Sector-specific research adds data-backed reinforcement to those anecdotal examples. OAG **describes** "an industry rich in demos and experiments while still lacking a strong vision for what the agentic travel experience should become."

The technology is advanced and capable, but the commercial applications are not fully formulated or even implemented yet.

Acquirers report the same imbalance from the payment side. A PYMNTS Intelligence® survey of **75 acquirers** across Brazil, the UAE, and the U.S. found the core payment rails may already support agent-led transactions, while merchants still contend with integration costs, aging systems, and unsettled rules on fraud and liability.

Payment readiness is uneven across the entire travel value chain.

Agents can already find the fare, the room type, or the activity a traveler is looking for. Whether the airline, hotel, or tour operator can accept, secure, and settle the agent's payment determines whether agentic demand will convert to revenue.

On that question, hype is currently winning out over reality.

The Ambition Gap: What Airlines Want From AI Versus What They Can Deliver

Airlines aren't short on ambition or budget. SITA's Impact Report 2025 projects that 97% of airlines and 82% of airports will have invested in AI by the end of 2026, and SITA Labs is already building agentic AI to orchestrate airline and airport workflows. The intent to run an agent-ready business is close to universal.

The foundations needed to realize those ambitions, however, are unfinished. SITA's Air Transport IT Insights argues that successful AI usage depends on aligned data rather than the models alone, and that fragmented operational data makes AI hesitate and slow to deliver value.

By that assessment, many airlines still lack the clean, connected order and payment data agentic retailing requires, adding to existing challenges with legacy technology stacks that must be addressed before true agentic commerce can be realized.

Airlines' payment systems are equally unprepared; most aren't even close to finishing **building the "S" in OOSD**, the settlement discipline that turns an order into money in the account. They run without a dedicated order management system, and payment tends to fall behind loyalty and ancillary integration when priorities are set.

Agentic commerce will add complexity across the transaction, but its greatest demands will fall on the payment infrastructure that airlines have underfunded. Airlines and travel merchants will face real technology barriers before their payment platforms can meet that demand.

97% of airlines and **82%** of airports will have invested in AI by year's end.

Analysis of NDC and AI in corporate travel procurement identified data privacy, integration complexity, limited internal AI expertise, and implementation cost as the main constraints slowing adoption. Airlines will need to address each before they can deploy agentic commerce successfully and at scale.

They will also need to reckon with a challenge that arises from the scale agentic booking represents. OAG reports that **look-to-book** is turning into a unit-cost problem, as agents fire hundreds of thousands of pricing calls without producing a single order and carriers work harder to filter unproductive NDC traffic.

An agent that queries a fare several hundred times for every booking completely changes the economics of distribution, and the airline pays for the queries regardless of whether those fares are settled.

AI agents can generate hundreds of thousands of pricing calls without producing a single order, turning look-to-book into a growing unit-cost problem for airlines.

Ambition points toward autonomous, agent-driven retailing. But today, data, integration, and payment readiness all sit well behind that ambition at most airlines.

Closing that gap begins with the one layer every agentic transaction must pass through: **payment**.

How Agent-Driven Payments Expose and Expand the Risk of Fraud

Where there are payments, there is the potential for fraud. The difference with agent-driven payments is the shift from human-speed to machine-speed fraud, where detection systems can no longer rely on human limits such as sleep cycles or consistent behavior. An agent transacts around the clock at a cadence no human can match, and fraud moves at the same pace.

Beyond speed, an agentic booking creates identity-related issues. An airline or travel seller currently verifies a person at checkout, whereas now it can also face an intermediary (agent) acting for or as that person.

That intermediary makes it much harder to confirm the buyer is who the agent claims, which is why **tokenization** becomes essential so the parties can exchange references to payment credentials rather than the raw credentials themselves.

The identity problem created by intermediation is also multiplied when **device data** and behavioral indicators that feed current fraud models are absent or altered. Fraud models tuned to human patterns are ill-equipped to identify, manage, or mitigate machine-led actions or tendencies.

Of course, airlines and travel merchants aren't helpless, and technology is already evolving to address these threats. Defenses are forming around the agent as a distinct actor: **Know Your Agent** verification, human-to-agent binding, and agent trust tokens all aim to authenticate the agent itself rather than only the person behind it.

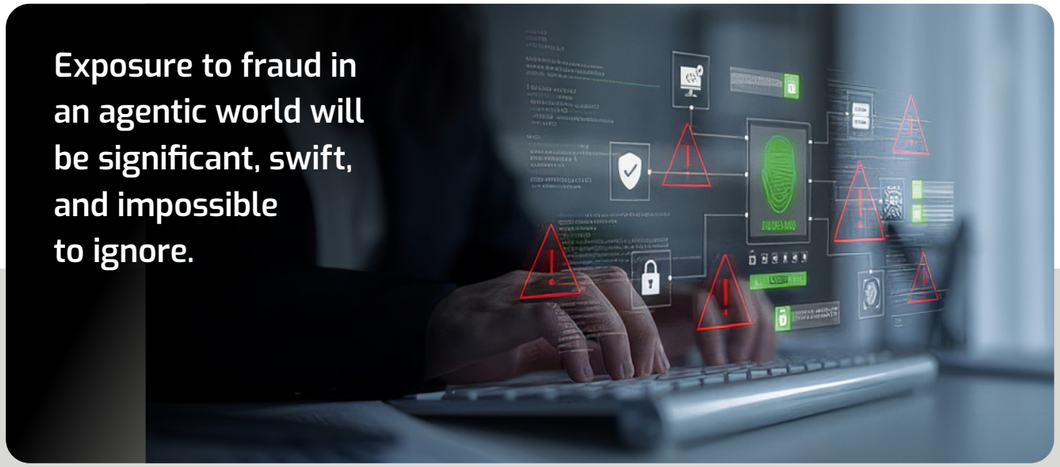
While these frameworks are early, they point to evolving checks on an agent's identity and behavior across a transaction as effective nodes of fraud control.

Cost is a factor, as always; PYMNTS Intelligence found that **83%** of financial institutions cite cost as a constraint on fraud-prevention upgrades, and airlines and travel merchants weigh the same trade-off against thin margins.

The fraud challenge won't wait for airlines and travel merchants to finish their agentic strategies; it will show up during the first agent-initiated payment. Airlines and travel merchants must be ready.

$1 billion

in annual fraud losses is pushing airlines to adopt real-time, risk-aware payment systems.



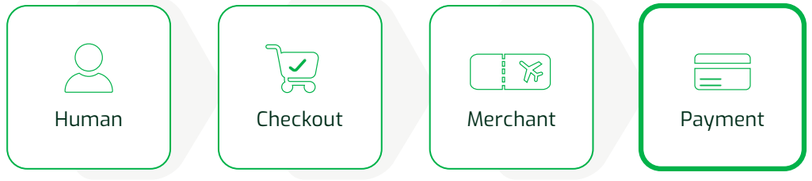
Regulation and Accountability: Open and Evolving Questions

Simple compliance won't inoculate airlines and travel merchants from fraud and other payment risks, as there isn't an established rulebook for agent-initiated payments yet. While payment laws recognize consumer-initiated and merchant-initiated transactions, agents acting for consumers fall outside both, posing new questions about consent, authentication, and liability. Regulators are working from definitions written for a different transaction era, and the new one is still being defined.

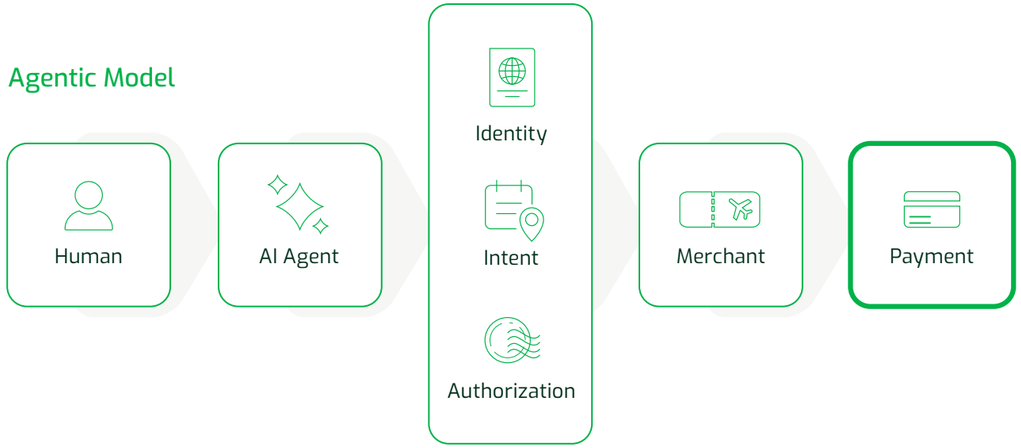
The current payment frameworks also assume a human at the keyboard or screen. PSD3, the PSR, built around a human authenticating at checkout, not an AI agent.

Agent-led transactions don't fit neatly within these existing payment and regulatory frameworks, and the industry doesn't expect the necessary rules and infrastructure to be in place before 2027 at the earliest.

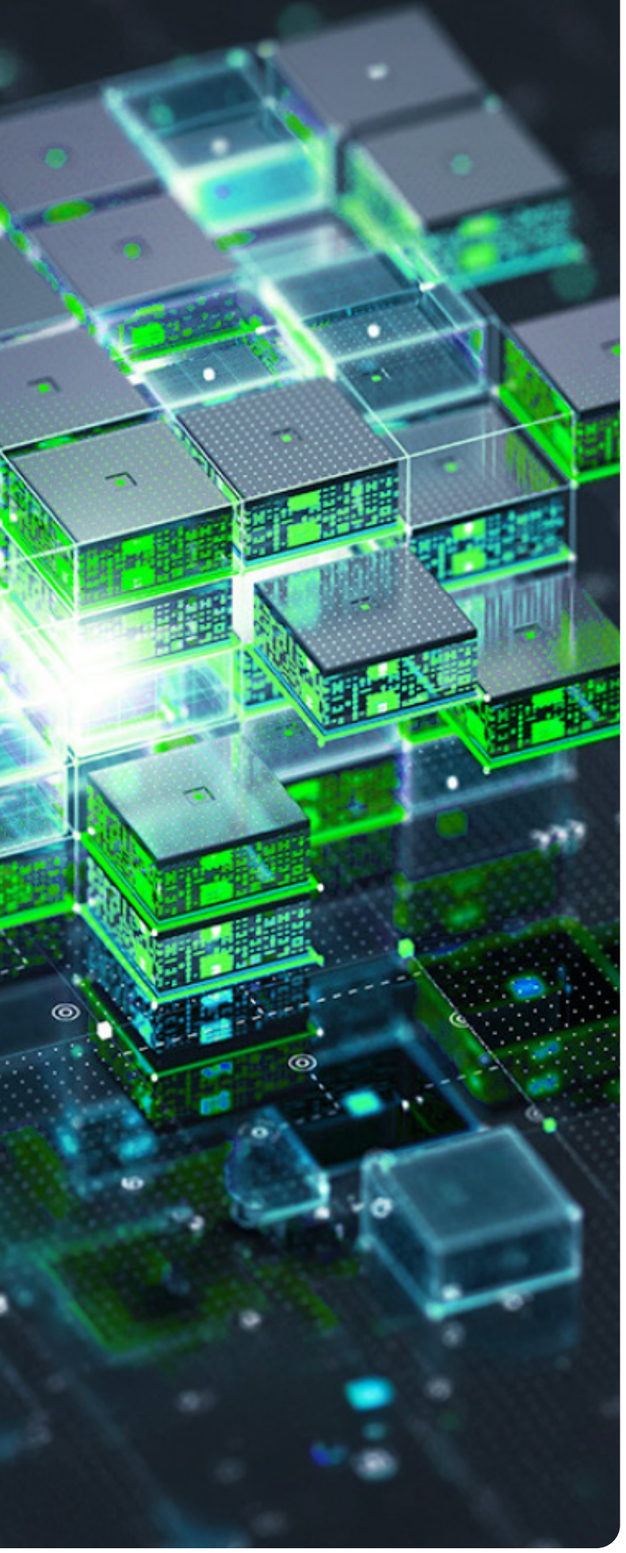
Current Model



Agentic Model



Airlines attempting to build agentic capability today are, in effect, building ahead of the rules that will eventually govern it.



In the meantime, liability still sits with the merchant. Under current rules, an airline carries the cost of a fraudulent transaction even with little visibility into how an agent set it in motion, while PSD3 and the PSR remove some liability from payment service providers that fail to put adequate **fraud controls** in place.

Airlines also carry responsibility for consumer consent and data protection. GDPR and emerging AI regulation both apply the moment an agent interprets a traveler's intent and holds their payment credentials, which puts the onus of compliance on any airline that lets agents transact.

Payment networks are developing their own answers to the questions of consent and liability that regulation has yet to settle. Mastercard® introduced **verifiable** intent, a tamper-resistant record of a user's authorization for agent-initiated payments meant to help resolve disputes and clarify liability, while Visa® has expanded its Visa Agentic Ready program.

Protocols such as Google's AP2™ and the Stripe® and OpenAI® ACP™ are still competing to become industry standard. The mechanisms for proving authorization and assigning accountability are clearly taking shape, but no single approach has won.

For airlines and travel merchants that sell across borders, the regulatory picture adds even more complexity as requirements vary by market and will continue to change. Monitoring those requirements and adapting payment and compliance processes accordingly is part of the cost of allowing agents to transact. That work must be built into the payment strategy from the outset, not bolted on after the agentic launch.



Regulatory frameworks

designed to address agentic commerce aren't expected until **2027** at the earliest.

Payment Readiness Keeps Every Agentic Option Open

Agentic commerce turns the issues raised in this paper into payment requirements and the need for an effective payment strategy designed for agent-led transactions. The gap between ambition and readiness, along with new fraud, liability, and regulatory demands, must be resolved at the payment layer before agents can transact at scale.

While AI agents may change how travelers search for and book travel, airlines and travel merchants still need infrastructure that can validate fares and rates, authorize payments, and settle funds efficiently and securely. That infrastructure becomes even more valuable as new agents, marketplaces, and booking interfaces emerge. The customer experience may keep changing, but the payment and settlement systems behind it must work across every model.

Airlines and travel merchants need several capabilities in place before committing to an agent strategy. Tokenized, credential-secure acceptance keeps raw payment data away from agents. Multi-tender and split-payment capabilities support agent-assembled baskets that combine fares, ancillaries, and loyalty currency.

Payment strategy must be the starting point for any agentic roadmap.

Payment orchestration across alternative payment methods and markets agents can reach broadens what airlines can accept, while reliable settlement and reconciliation help them manage transaction volumes.

As an industry-owned payment network designed for airline settlement, UATP provides tokenization, multi-tender capability, and BSP-wide reach. Ceptor® adds gateway orchestration across more than 300 alternative payment methods, while UATP One™ provides the full suite of merchant services.

Together, these critical capabilities allow airlines and travel merchants to accept agent-initiated transactions without re-architecting their payment stacks.

Agents may transact within an airline's channels, through a marketplace, or across using a protocol that has yet to be developed.

Airlines that establish their payment strategy now will have the flexibility to support whichever model emerges and dominates.

Those that delay this investment risk having to retrofit their payment infrastructure under pressure as agent-driven transactions rapidly gain volume.

The starting point is a payment-readiness assessment. Can your airline or OTA verify customer authorization, protect payment credentials, manage fraud and liability, support the required payment methods, and reconcile agent-initiated transactions at scale?

Those answers will determine which agentic models you can support today, where you need to invest to enable future capabilities, and how quickly you can proceed.



$20 billion

Agentic-optimized payment solutions will feature tokenization, multi-tender capabilities, and gateway orchestration.

No one can say yet which agentic model will prevail.

UATP®

Agentic Commerce and the UATP Advantage

Preparing your business for agentic commerce starts with identifying whether your current payment stack can support agent-led transactions and where it falls short. Assess your payment readiness **before** committing to an agentic roadmap and establish the payment foundation your strategy will depend on.

UATP is the global payment network simplifying payments in complex industries. We make it easy for businesses to accept or make any type of payment, open new markets, drive growth, and reduce costs for Network Participants, vendors, agents, aggregators, and more.

To learn how UATP can help improve your payments strategy, visit www.uatp.com

