UPGRADING TO A

FIRST-CLASS

AIRPORT EXPERIENCE

WITH PASSENGER EXPECTATIONS INCREASING AND TECHNOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS PAVING THE WAY, AIRPORTS MUST FIGURE OUT HOW TO NOT ONLY KEEP UP BUT ALSO SURPASS EXPECTATIONS.

"My luggage is missing." "I couldn't connect to the Wi-Fi." "I was late for my flight because security lines were backed up." "I couldn't find a parking spot."

The end-to-end travel journey has many touchpoints, and given the globally connected world of aviation, there are many situations when travelers encounter less-than-ideal travel experiences.

With the interconnected nature of travel, any single variable has the potential to uproot day-of-travel plans. The stars must align in a complex network of processes for a passenger to make it safely to the airport, navigate through the check-in and baggage queues, move smoothly through security, depart and arrive on time, collect luggage, and have a satisfying overall airport experience. If these elements are not integrated completely or seamlessly, the experience will likely be impacted, leading to inefficiencies that can drain resources — and goodwill — if left untended.

Many intricate pieces that are unseen by the passenger must fit together to support smooth operations. One detail gone wrong — weather or mechanical delays, for example — can compound, leaving airports and constituent stakeholders to respond and operate efficiently to put the pieces back together. »

According to the Federal Aviation Administration, more than 2.7 million passengers fly in and out of U.S. airports daily. And over the next two decades, the forecast anticipates passenger numbers that will double today's levels, according to the International Air Transport Association. As the number of travelers continues to increase, and consumer technology advances, so will passenger expectations. With an eye toward innovation, airports must find ways to plan, design and deliver a better experience for travelers.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Understanding what influences a traveler's experience depends on understanding how airports operate — which is unlike any other commercial enterprise. For example, at a national coffeehouse chain, the CEO can quickly sign off on a new advancement to reduce drive-thru wait times for customers. However, globally connected airports can't always directly control the entirety of what happens at their respective facilities.

There are many stakeholders involved, including the Department of Homeland Security, airlines, ground handlers, retail shops and departments, and, in some cases, city or county governments. Because the journey doesn't begin or end at the airport, other variables also influence the overall experience, including transportation and traffic. It is almost impossible to envision a seamless journey if these elements are not considered. In addition, competing interests of stakeholders, if left without fostering collaborative decision-making, can drive design or operations toward lowest common denominators.

"While it is in every airport's default mindset to operate safely and securely, each stakeholder can differ in how he or she wants day-to-day operations to run, and there is no one blueprint to copy and paste for all airports," says Stu Garrett, an aviation project manager at Burns & McDonnell. Cultural and regional views, traveler familiarity, language differences and access to consumer technology require airports to evaluate and respond to meet growth curves appropriately.

"On top of things like easy check-ins, short security lines and punctual luggage retrieval, today's travelers expect the airport to be just like their living room or office, with comfortable temperatures, great audio-visual interactivity and blazing-fast Wi-Fi," Garrett says.

Because airports' life spans stretch 50 years or more, choosing how or what to invest in is a complex challenge, especially considering that capital costs — and expectations — are high, and the stakeholder base vast.

CREATING THE IDEAL AIRPORT EXPERIENCE

Part of passenger stress stems from the potential pain points of certain processes within the airport experience that are not streamlined or seamless.

"Because there is a time associated with each airport process, technologies are focusing on ways to speed up these steps, and airports are beginning to take notice," says Nathan Sims, an aviation project manager at Burns & McDonnell.

Some technologies lessen the stress based on certain factors identified for improvement, especially as queue studies, data analytics and biometrics advance.

With the TSA Modernization Act, queue wait time technology is required to keep the Transportation Security Administration and travelers informed. The intent is to better inform passengers about where and when they should arrive at security checkpoints.

Technology that utilizes biometrics is one strategy that has enormous potential to improve the passenger experience and provide smooth traveling in the future. Biometrics includes the measurement and analysis of unique physical or behavioral characteristics, such as facial details, voice patterns or fingerprints.

Thanks to biometric technology, with the facial recognition system travelers won't have to pause to show photo identification to a security agent.

Instead, a passenger who has details already in the system can look into a special camera to establish his or her identity. Biometrics can shorten security lines significantly, as such seconds-long identification could minimize or eliminate the queuing that causes so much frustration.

While biometric technology can provide significant benefits to airports and travelers, full deployment and adoption of this technology may take years.

Facility cleanliness is another area that technology is addressing. Smart restrooms are trending within airports, stadiums and other arenas that accommodate large volumes of people. Features include sensors above the stalls, lights that indicate occupancy status and mounted tablets for facility guests to rate their experiences. »

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>
> **STU GARRETT**

With the large number of users, smart restroom technology helps keep janitorial staff aware of the current state of the restrooms and managers in the know from a consumption perspective.

The passenger experience extends beyond the facility itself. It's important for airport management to keep in mind what steps the traveler must take before entering and after leaving the building. Something as small as an overhang to stand under while waiting for a ride, or additional wayfinding signs that give an improved sense of direction, drastically can change how the traveler views his or her airport experience.

With the amount of technology and tools available today, airports have the resources to enhance the passenger experience — from curbside to takeoff and beyond. Something that might seem small to airport management could be the one thing that disrupts a traveler's day. Incorporating key stakeholder inputs — including the passenger's perspective — can help airports implement small, impactful details or larger-scale overhauls for an optimal traveling experience.

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