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Opening Perspective

Airports are continually expanding and optimizing their facilities to enhance the passenger experience and to provide more amenities to airport users. With passenger numbers increasing year over year, airports will need to continue to find ways to deliver positive experiences for today’s traveler.

In fact, according to ACI-NA’s 2017 passenger amenities survey and outlook, in the next three to five years, passengers should expect new and expanded airport amenities and services, including children’s play areas, nursing mother’s rooms and pods, pet relief facilities, airfield observation areas and others. Other facilities, features and programs to enhance the passenger experience include common use kiosks for check-in, express security clearance and immigration options, free Wi-Fi, electric charging stations, express vending machines, in-terminal art programs, live music and more. And, airports are phasing out redundant or unnecessary amenities, such as payphones, banks and smoking rooms.

And as aviation infrastructure demands increase, terminal design to improve the passenger experience has become a top priority. We already know technology will continue to drive innovation in the traveler experience. Passengers are being entertained more than ever before with innovative digital experiences and mobile technology may go further to providing customer service and information about flight status in real time.

This edition of Aviation Insight shares the experiences and suggestions from several aviation professionals, who are at the forefront of the industry’s continued progress in modernizing our Nation’s airports by envisioning not only what is needed today but anticipating what will be needed in the future.

For Southwest passengers, finding their way could get way easier

Pilot program furthers goal of a ‘frictionless’ customer experience

Southwest Airlines’ overall vision is to be the world’s most loved, most flown, most profitable airline. For us, it all begins with our employees. We are founded on the principle that if we take care of our employees first, our employees will take care of our customers, our customers will want to fly Southwest and that will take care of our investors. Our Innovation Center and Lab continually seeks ways to bring that principle to life. One of our most recent and successful pilot programs was a series of new signs erected inside the terminal at Dallas’ Love Field.

The two-week pilot program, designed to answer customers’ most pressing flight questions, was intended to enhance the employee experience as much as the customer experience. Our goals:

- Provide precise, trustworthy, accurate information for both parties
- Give our customers greater peace of mind when traveling
- Make customers and employees alike feel welcome, cared for and appreciated
- Use our physical space effectively
- Empower our employees to provide the highest service level

Making air travel fun again

We designed the signs to help our customers enjoy their time at the airport and move more quickly to connections, but also to liberate our employees from answering rote questions and focus more on genuine customer interaction. For example, “Where is my connection?” is one of the top questions our employees field. Whether passengers are arriving 10 minutes early or 15 minutes late, we found it’s a great customer-service function to be able to provide deplaning travelers with immediate connection information.

Connecting-flight signs were just one part of the Love Field experiment. We also added 73 different digital screens to ensure customer flow is easy, smooth and less stressful in the airport and to allow customers to step away from the gate and enjoy the food court and other amenities.

For example, a full-color wall-sized monitor displayed, in tile format, all departing flights. Each tile listed the specific flight, departure time and a quick message such as “Your flight is right on time,” “Yes, you’ve got time for breakfast,” or “Yes, you’ve got time for the gift shop.” These types of messages are easy to understand, fun and have brought the Southwest brand to life in a new dimension.

Extending the program

The pilot program was so popular, we extended it through the 2017 Thanksgiving travel season. There have been few initiatives during my career where the employee satisfaction scores were as high as the customer satisfaction scores. Because of that, we plan to permanently implement portions of the program in 2018 at select airports, including Love Field. The success of this pilot program has given us traction and momentum to keep updating and elevating the passenger experience in the way only Southwest Airlines can.

Guided by seven principles

We attribute the signs’ popularity to the seven principles we used to develop the pilot program:

1. Function first. Each sign answered the fundamental question, “What do I need to know right now?” Easy-to-find concise, accurate, personal information provided the answer.

Opening Perspective

LADDIE IRION
HNTB Corporation
National Aviation Sector Leader

Heather Figallo
Senior Director of Innovation, Design and Entrepreneurship
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In human-centered design, the user is the expert, and there is no preconceived solution. This design practice is a new way of looking at things for us, and I think we will continue to use this methodology, as the results speak for themselves.

We also were not concerned about funding at this point. Some of the signs at Love Field directed customers to food and other non-aeronautical revenue services that did not necessarily benefit our airline but would benefit the terminal owner and retailers. It begins the question: Should the terminal owner help pay for future permanent programs? We don’t have the answer to that yet. However, the City of Dallas was a great partner in running this test, and we continue to work with them and our airport affairs team to determine how financial arrangements will work in the future.

3. Provide location-appropriate information. When the customer first walked into the airport, our signs provided a broad level of information and became more granular as passengers walked closer to their gates and the jet bridge.

In addition to the signs, we offered a mobile app. The mobile app worked in concert with the digital signs to provide an even more personalized, guided experience for customers. For example, customers could input their food preferences and the app would guide them to a relevant restaurant that would meet their needs.

4. The Southwest voice. After several tests, the human approach — with a touch of humor — emerged as the most popular tone for the signs. For example, in addition to telling passengers their flight was boarding now, the sign would read, “Run! We’re cheering for you!”

Although surprised by this outcome, we attribute the positive response to:

- Our “bags fly free” offer. Customers whose seats were in section C had a heads up to gate-check their bags because they could see there might not be enough overhead storage.
- Time savings. Our employees found they weren’t having to answer the No. 1 customer question, “How full is the flight?”
- Non-rev employees. They could identify and board the emptier flights.

7. Simplicity. The best advice? Keep it simple, which is harder than it sounds. There are so many new technologies and shiny objects out there these days. Just because you can use these tools doesn’t mean you should.

Collaborating for a better industry
Southwest Airlines also is working with the Transportation Security Administration to improve the lobby experience and to make it easier and less stressful for customers. In fact, we are seeing greater collaboration among the TSA, cities and airlines to improve commercial air travel. Southwest Airlines wants to be part of that. As we like to say, “A rising tide lifts all ships.” When we all come together, the airline industry and commercial travel become better for everyone — customers and employees alike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Heather Figallo is the senior director of innovation, design and entrepreneurship for Southwest Airlines. She is responsible for leading the discipline of innovation as well as the newly formed labs group, which develops prototypes and other stimulus for customer and employee feedback. Among her accomplishments, she launched the Innovation Center and Lab. Contact her at Heather.Figallo@wnco.com.
Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport implements ambitious, multi-faceted improvement program

Completed, ongoing and planned project capital projects increase passenger satisfaction, revenue and return trips

The Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP) is busier than ever, with a record 38 million passengers in 2017, and even more projected in the years ahead. To meet anticipated growth and passengers’ evolving needs, the nation’s 16th busiest airport is rolling out a series of thoughtfully planned capital projects designed to make traveling to and from MSP easier and more enjoyable.

Aviation Insight recently sat down with Bridget M. Rief, Vice President-Planning and Development at Metropolitan Airports Commission, the airport’s owner and operator, to talk about the improvements and their place in the evolution of passenger service.

AI: Holistically, what is MSP’s approach to improving the customer experience?

Rief: The improvement projects have given us the opportunity to think about how we meet the needs of all our passengers. One of the great things about working for an airport is that our customer base is very diverse. We serve business and leisure travelers, men and women, families, people of all ages and people with disabilities. We serve those who embrace technology and those who prefer a face-to-face experience. Our passengers are a very diverse group, and we’ve got to make sure we’re thinking about all of them.

We are making improvements throughout the airport, in both pre-security and post-security areas, based upon what passengers have told us they want.

We also have made several improvements inside the terminal, behind security checkpoints, which will benefit all of our passengers — both O&D and connecting passengers.

AI: Can you provide details on some of these improvements?

Rief: Starting at the ‘front of the house,’ we’ve improving the passenger experience by remodeling and adding space on the pre-security side to Terminal One-Lindbergh. All four levels — the mezzanine, ticket lobby, arrivals level and ground transportation level — are being expanded to provide more space. Bumping out the terminal’s front wall by about 16 feet all along its length will give us more passenger processing space, more space to navigate the terminal, and more queue space for the security checkpoints. Expanding the terminal’s footprint also will allow us to install larger baggage claim devices in our arrivals area.

The expansion also will create a lighter, brighter space with more natural daylight. Coupled with improved wayfinding, the terminal will be easier and more intuitive to navigate. Tech-savvy passengers who want to check in on their phones and head right to security can do that and be on their way. Passengers who want face-to-face service can use our new ticket counters.

The concessions also are a big part of the customer experience. We did a lot of research to determine what people want, and we are completely revamping our concessions to include a good mix of local and national brands, strategic retail and on-trend restaurants. We’ve already strategically placed and opened 50 new retail stores and restaurants, and another 30 will be opening over the next 18 to 24 months. We’ve also dedicated more space than ever to local businesses that represent Minnesota. Already, we’re seeing results, with sales per passenger increasing from $10.55 to $11.43 in a year.

Also, while it’s not a new concept, we’re opening an onsite hotel here this summer. The Intercontinental Hotel will be connected to Terminal One via a skyway, so passengers will have the convenience of staying right here on the property.

In addition, a new, 11-story parking ramp, the fourth on the property, will open in 2020, with space for 5,000 vehicles.
Enhancing passenger experience starts with thorough pre-planning

Collaboration among stakeholders is key to attracting and retaining customers

As travelers enjoy more choices than ever in the airlines they fly and airports they use, both airports and airlines are under greater pressure than ever to win and retain customers. Airports are distinguishing themselves in an historically competitive market by providing services and facilities that enhance their customers’ experience and strategically meet their evolving needs.

Today, airports realize that creating a good experience for the customer can generate both revenue and return visits. But, it must span the entire journey, from driving to the airport and parking, through ticketing and security, to concessions, waiting and boarding. At every point, airports can — and should — have an opportunity to make a great impression.

Airports can simultaneously meet customers’ needs and plan for future growth through a holistic, well-organized approach founded on thorough pre-planning, collaboration, flexibility and communication. Airports that are most successful have incorporated the following principles into their approaches to capital improvements.

Identify and involve all stakeholders

Pre-planning is essential. The first step in any capital project is to identify all landside and airside decision-making stakeholders, including representatives from the airport, state and local governments, the airlines, concessions, advertising and public relations agencies and the community.

Schedule an ongoing series of planning workshops to identify needs and keep all stakeholders engaged in the process. These workshops should continue through the project’s life cycle, to refine the master plan, meet evolving needs and resolve emerging challenges and disputes.

Prioritize stakeholders’ needs according to Impact

The goal of any terminal enhancement program is to proactively offset passenger stress and improve the travel experience.

Three key elements make up passenger experience: concessions, amenities and interior design. During stakeholder workshops, develop a comprehensive inventory and direction for each of these elements. Moving forward, the process then becomes an issue of continual refinement and consensus-building, rather than ongoing discovery and re-planning.

Determining which components generate revenue and which do not is critical to setting priorities. When assessing what needs to be improved, airports should examine the productivity of their concession programs, as well as the revenues they receive from passenger amenities. Often, concessions and amenities that are not generating revenue can be reworked to optimize their performance and revenue-generating capabilities.

Airlines are responsible for making the landside and airside experience easier for the passenger, and should, at a minimum, provide knowledgeable and helpful staff, and satisfactory hold lounge accommodations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more information about the ongoing renovation project, visit https://reimaginemsp.com/.

AI: What are some of the other key learnings from your passenger surveys?

Rief: First, the need to enhance technology: expanding our Wi-Fi and cellular coverage has made a world of difference for our passengers. Over the past year, we have expanded our Wi-Fi and cell coverage within the terminals and even to our parking areas and transit areas.

Second, enhanced amenities; we’ve also been focusing on upgraded business centers and comfortable public seating areas throughout the terminals and enhancing our digital directories.

Third, improving our aesthetics; passengers care about functionality, but they also care about aesthetics. As a result, we’re taking a more holistic approach to design of the spaces and how such elements as signage, art and advertising are integrated. Do they fit together? Do they complement each other? Taking an integrated, holistic approach creates a much ‘cleaner’, more attractive space, and makes wayfinding that much easier.

We recently added new gates at Terminal Two, and the design and construction of those new gates provided the opportunity to holistically incorporate art from our ‘Art at MSP’ program into the design and construction of those spaces. We chose the art and designed the spaces around it, instead of the other way around.

AI: Industry-wide, the holistic approach to design and construction seems to be growing. Do you agree?

Rief: Yes, but doing that really takes a village, a team of people from various disciplines — aviation, commercial management, design, construction, wayfinding, accessibility, marketing, arts and culture for example — who can collectively think things through and work together.

AI: What are some of the takeaways from the design and construction processes?

Rief: We’re not building a new terminal; we’re building in an existing terminal, which is challenging. We’ve still got to get people through this terminal, and the front-of-house, passenger processing and concessions all need to continue operating.

I think we’ve done a wonderful job of keeping passengers informed and keeping them flowing through the terminal. With just having hosted Super Bowl LII, it was especially important that people find their way through the construction spaces. But, we learned early on that we must be very nimble in terms of signage and wayfinding in work areas. If something wasn’t working, if passengers were having difficulty navigating the space, we needed to react to that.

Communication is key. We created a new website: Reimagine MSP where our passengers can learn more about all the things that are happening at the airport, and what to expect during the construction.

Direct feedback from our passengers and the public has been invaluable. It has informed our current improvements, and will shape how we serve the next generation of travelers.

For more information about the ongoing renovation project, visit https://reimaginemsp.com/.

“We’re not building a new terminal; we’re building in an existing terminal, which is challenging”

We’re not building a new terminal; we’re building in an existing terminal, which is challenging.
Distribute costs among stakeholders

Generally, the cost of upgrades related to passenger experience are not borne solely by the airports, and often are shared with other stakeholders. Since airports view enhancements as revenue generators, costs are passed on to the concessionaires, advertisers and providers of certain amenities, such as recharging stations and Smart Carts. It’s also surprisingly easy to find sponsors for many amenities that normally would be funded by the airport, including comfort zones and service animal relief areas.

“...we can integrate into the waiting experience, the more pleasant and less stressful it becomes.”

Terminal improvements, however, are handled differently. If the enhancement requires power or data, infrastructure costs need to be considered. Airports also shoulder the cost of any special mounting or support structures needed.

Improvements should be strategic

Efficiently moving passengers through a terminal is of primary importance, yet remains a persistent and thorny challenge. Waiting produces a lot of stress for passengers. To offset this stress, today’s airports are strategically inserting amenities throughout the airport that minimize or mitigate wait times and improve passengers’ overall experience.

Self-service technology has improved exponentially over the past several years, and is being installed in airports throughout the world to reduce wait times and improve passenger flow. Simultaneously, ticketing counters are getting smaller, as more passengers use self-service ticketing kiosks, tagging devices and bag checks. While ticket counters will not disappear, their reduction in number and size will help encourage passengers to check themselves in and be on their way faster and more efficiently in the future.

Security is another area that produces both wait times and stress. To combat this, airports are installing branded security checkpoints that incorporate comfortable, attractive lounge seating and upscale furnishings for passengers to re-vest after screened is completed. In addition, advances in screening technology will allow future passengers to flow through checkpoints with less steps.

Incorporate thoughtful, on-trend amenities and concessions

Passengers should have an enjoyable experience once they pass through security. Airports now capitalize on post-security dwell time by creating more enticing and enjoyable shopping environments, along with better food and beverage offerings. Chef-inspired and farm-to-table sit-down restaurants are now taking the place of fast food. Entertainment venues, with live music and upscale bars, also are becoming very popular.

Take advantage of smart technology

“Smart” airports, which work in tandem with passengers’ smart phones, are becoming more prevalent. Airport applications can turn handheld devices into surprisingly effective tools for maneuvering through the travel experience, offering services such as terminal wayfinding, notifications regarding flight status, and the delivery of retail and food and beverage directly to passengers’ hold lounges.

At some airports, passengers can use smart technology from the moment they enter the airport property. For example, passengers driving to the airport can be directed to open parking spaces, and receive notifications about wait times at check-in and security. Once they pass through security, passengers can get notifications from the retailers and restaurants at the airport, helping them decide how to spend their dwell time. As passengers near the gates, they can get timely information from the airlines on arrival, departure and wait times.

Airports also are incorporating facial recognition at their ticketing counters and baggage systems, to keep passenger traffic flowing and help eliminate lines and delays pre- and post-flight.

Solicit passenger input to continually improve

Surveys are a great tool for determining what the customer wants or doesn’t want, what causes stress and what gets their attention, and are vital to enhancement planning. Surveys are typically performed in partnership with an independent consultant, and should be performed by a consultant that is experienced in serving the aviation industry. Surveys also should be performed and scrutinized throughout construction and then, at regular intervals, to assess needs and priorities as they evolve.

Much has changed in the aviation industry over the past two decades, and the industry is poised for even more change over the next two decades and beyond. Airports now recognize that, to stay competitive, enhancements to improve the passenger experience can no longer be afterthoughts, but must be incorporated into the earliest stages of planning.

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Discerning passenger preferences

The tools Sea-Tac uses to create a traveler-centric airport

Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is the ninth busiest airport in the U.S. Forty percent more passengers move through our airport today than in 2012, and Sea-Tac’s terminal buildings are at capacity. To keep pace with demand, we are adding new facilities such as a renovated and expanded North Satellite, more dining and retail options and a new International Arrivals Facility. We also are adding amenities to our existing terminal to improve the passenger experience. We are making these investments because we believe serving passengers is not just about providing a facility where they can catch a flight. It’s about understanding and incorporating their preferences into the experience.

The Port of Seattle is committed to exemplary customer services at Sea-Tac, including a high-quality experience for travelers. Our ultimate goal is to reduce stress and create a more inviting, relaxing environment — an airport passengers are excited to visit. To make the Sea-Tac experience one passengers look forward to, we use data gathered from surveys, social media as well as employees, airlines and tenants.

For example, Sea-Tac was one of the first airports in the country to provide a dedicated space for nursing mothers in 2004. We have since learned parents want more of these spaces, so we installed five mobile Mamava nursing suites throughout the airport, putting them closer to more departure gates. The Mamava suites, however, are a temporary solution. We plan to build permanent mother’s rooms as our facilities undergo renovation because while mothers are loving the new accommodation, they are requesting bigger spaces with sinks and more comfortable furniture.

We’ve also listened to passenger input and are improving our Wi-Fi coverage across the airport and installing more comfortable holdroom seating with outlets for charging personal devices. Additionally, we are planning to add more service animal relief areas and quiet spaces, where passengers can retreat from the commotion and bustle of main thoroughfares.

We use several methodologies to discern traveler preferences and then synergize the findings to meet or exceed passenger experiences.

On-the-spot passenger surveys

Our business intelligence department designs and administers a variety of passenger surveys to gather data on specific topics or collect overall impressions of the airport. Many of these surveys are conducted in-person by surveyors stationed throughout the airport terminal or parking garages, depending on the survey’s subject matter. Surveys are conducted periodically throughout the year for broad-based feedback and can be narrowed and conducted on-demand when we want to dig deeper into an important topic.

Passenger survey responses have helped shape our current Airport Dining and Retail Upgrade Project. Our customers’ questions and comments have influenced the types of retail and personal services offered at Sea-Tac and, in some cases, where they are positioned throughout the terminal. Also, recurring requests, such as spa services, additional vegetarian options or more ethnic food restaurants, have helped influence the dining, retail and passenger service concepts we seek to add to our airport.

Security checkpoint wait times frequently rise to the top of passengers’ concerns. To better communicate security wait times, the Port partnered with the local TSA to direct passengers in real-time to shorter or recently opened security lines. We’ve added checkpoint wait times to our flight information displays, and we’ve positioned Pathfinders, our customer service team, in the check-in lobby to help direct passengers. Additionally, in alliance with the TSA, we’ve recently installed automated screening lanes and increased TSA K-9 presence in the security queues to further expedite passenger screening.

Social media as a source for data mining

Social media is a great way for the Port of Seattle to listen and connect in real time with our customers. It allows us not only to collect questions, comments and complaints but to disseminate information about our passenger services, amenities and provide customer service on a broader scale. If we want to know passengers’ opinions about restrooms or holdrooms, for example, our customer service analyst will sift through posts on our Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts in search of keywords related to those topics and generate a report of the findings. Passengers are far more likely to tweet what’s on their minds in the moment versus calling, emailing or writing us about their experiences.

When we pair survey data with social media posts, we identify universal concerns, such as wayfinding, holdroom comfort and faster Wi-Fi connections — an expectation of Seattle’s high-tech demographic. These comments help identify where Sea-Tac may be falling short from the passenger experience perspective. Based on that research, we are developing a wayfinding and signage master plan and incorporating accessibility studies into renovation and expansion projects to make our airport a friendlier place for all passengers.
Frontline employee, tenant and airline input
We involve frontline employees and our airline partners in identifying problems as well as developing and analyzing potential solutions because we know we cannot make passenger improvements in a vacuum.

During a study to optimize space in our main terminal, we identified an area we thought could process more passengers. Before we acted on the idea, I asked our frontline customer service employees for their opinions and learned the strategy wasn’t feasible. Passengers actually bottleneck at that location. Trying to channel more people to that area wouldn’t be wise. Because of employee input, we moved on to other considerations rather than chasing a project that could have made things worse.

We also ask our tenants and airlines to participate in project planning because they share the same desire to create an exceptional passenger experience and frequently have more direct interaction with passengers than we do. For example, many ideas for holdroom configurations that looked great when drawn up in an office have been picked apart by airline employees who manage the passenger processing and activities in those areas every day. Developing and testing different configurations together always leads to better outcomes.

Remembering why we’re in business
Airports exist to facilitate air travel — moving people, baggage and cargo through facilities to airplanes that must take off and land. But serving passengers isn’t just about providing a facility where they can catch a flight. At Sea-Tac, enhancing the experience of those who create demand for our services is equally important.

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