

Q&A with En Route International's Richard Wake: Insight, innovation and data

This is a special feature from *PAX International's* [September 2023 IFSA EXPO](#) issue on [page 28](#).



Richard Wake, Insight & Innovation Director, En Route International

Richard Wake, Insight & Innovation Director at [En Route International](#) recently spoke to *PAX International* about how emerging consumer trends highlight the fact that passengers want airlines to provide products and services that cater to their individual needs. It is no surprise that a passenger-focused flight can improve the travelling experience. But how can this trend translate into revenue for suppliers and airlines alike?

In June, En Route International released [The Embracing Challenges and Harnessing Trends in Airline Onboard Hospitality](#) report to help demystify some of the challenges facing the airline catering industry today. In the report, ten industry stakeholders assisted En Route International's research team to produce insights about sustainability trends, technological innovations and what passengers are really looking for in flight.

As a food service and supply chain business, En Route uses the data gathered from the report to look at ingredient profiling, future trends and forecasting what's next. Key insights from the report include

“a growing importance placed on the use of perceived high-quality ingredients,” a rising popularity of “uncomplicated, yet satisfying snacks” and “a stronger emphasis on supporting local businesses and sourcing products from nearby regions.”

In terms of technology, optimizing digital touch points (from booking a flight to pre-ordering food items) was reported as a top priority for investments.

This industry Q&A takes that report as a starting point, using the discussion with Wake to catch a glimpse at emerging industry trends and illuminate how data is a key component to truly enhancing the inflight customer experience.

***PAX International:* Personalization was a major theme at WTCE earlier this year — it is clear that passengers want to see their individual needs being directly catered to during a flight. Beyond increasing a passenger’s experience onboard, how can airlines use personalization trends to generate revenue?**

Richard Wake: Personalization is a sub-trend of a wider emerging trend where individualism and expression are becoming commonplace amongst consumers.

We’ve seen it emerge from the COVID pandemic where products and experiences are more widely available and closely aligned with individual consumer needs. At a retail level, increasing product relevance to consumers enhances engagement and creates more involved buying behaviour. It can also lead to higher consumer satisfaction at a time when preferences are becoming stronger and more forcefully expressed.

For example, customers are able to select their own ice cream toppings when on certain airlines, giving them the opportunity to create bespoke products.

From an airline perspective, there has been an increased focus on adopting digital tools to enable personalized elements, where meal experiences can be tailored.

***PAX International:* Your point about digital tools is interesting as the digitization of choice options can make data-capture easier for airlines and suppliers. More data ultimately leads to leverage for future planning. In your opinion, what data be useful in predicting trends?**

Wake: As a global business, keeping abreast of regional and cultural behaviours is key to understanding what trends are emerging — there isn’t a one size fits all.

Emerging consumer trends, such as the individualism and expression trend is crucial for product development, too.

For us, we need to make the distinction between behaviour onboard and more generalized consumer behaviour. Whilst trends do overlap, there will always be variances which need to be taken into account.

We engage in qualitative discussions with our stakeholders and use this as a basis for further research across other market data platforms.

Legislation, too, clearly can have an impact in dictating trends and movement within sectors.

For example, what happens to Category 1 waste will have an effect on our ability as an industry to develop truly circular waste streaming, recovery and reuse in all regions. This is something that has

been identified and discussed as part of the great work being done by the Aviation Sustainability Forum which En Route is a member.

PAX International: In our conversation, you mentioned how data has helped En Route International find the “why” that gives the company an idea of “what to do” in regards to improving the passenger experience, drive efficiency and optimize service delivery. How is En Route using data to improve its value to airline customers?

Wake: We have invested significantly in our research and insight team in-house. This has included a re-structured and dedicated team that works in partnership with our customers.

We also operate a number of platforms that inform on industry insight, consumer demographics, design, tech and consumer trends. This is applied to every project we work on for our customers, ensuring that what we propose is targeted more effectively at the passenger and helps to drive value.

We also utilize “Design Thinking” based methodology to build insights and ultimately new product ideas and services by linking together and interrogating data and trends. Design thinking is a systemic, intuitive, customer-focused problem-solving approach that organizations can use to respond to rapidly changing environments and to create maximum impact.

PAX International: In the theme of capitalizing on data, can you speak to how taking a service partner approach is proving to increase your value to airline customers and helping them achieve their own objectives?

Wake: There was a seismic shift in the industry during and post the height COVID. Airlines are now thinking differently about growth and how to get there.

Our proposition is that we don’t simply provide a passenger solution or logistics exercise in silo — we actively partner with customers to broadly understand their objectives through the whole cycle — product, packaging, service delivery and supply chain. We ensure that what we do in turn helps airlines to achieve their goals too. It’s about collaboration, not simply a transactional relationship.

We need to understand real challenges that our customers and partners are facing and through the approach mentioned above we can provide a unique opportunity to help solve these issues. It’s about becoming an extension of our customers’ business and understanding the real “need behind need.”

To do this we must employ multiple techniques to understand and build a deeper understanding of their pain points to build a bigger picture of the challenge. This means our proposition is better aligned to achieve their goals.

PAX International: A key theme of En Route International’s recent report is special meals. A prediction is made in the report that the topic will only increase in relevance in the upcoming years. “Millennials and Gen Z are the driving force,” the report says, “particularly for vegetarian and vegan meals.” What current ingredient trends are important to passengers?

Wake: That’s a big question! Again, it’s not a “one size fits all” and is often dependant on locality and demographic breakdown.

We tend to look at this by category as part of our wider planning — for example, across the bakery category, younger consumers are reaching for fruity bakery and confectionery snacks that have healthy connotations.

With savoury, we're seeing a big trend in Sensory & Indulgence come into favour.

"Flavour-play" is also becoming increasingly more popular with consumers as they are more willing than ever to experiment with unusual flavour combinations.