

dnata's Robin Padgett on the evolution of inflight retail

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Robin Padgett, CEO of Catering & Retail, dnata

As airlines refine onboard retail strategies, the focus is shifting from simply expanding product choice to delivering curated, brand-aligned propositions that balance passenger appeal with operational efficiency. According to Robin Padgett, CEO of Catering & Retail at [dnata](#), airlines today are asking for more thoughtful retail programs that combine creativity with disciplined execution.

“What we are seeing clearly is that airlines, whether full service or retail, are asking for smarter, more curated propositions,” Padgett says. “They want the right balance between choice, brand storytelling and operational discipline.”

One of the most visible trends is the rise of premium snacking and light-meal concepts that bridge the gap between traditional inflight meals and buy-on-board offerings.

“These products are positioned as intentional culinary moments rather than cost plays,” explains Padgett.



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Airlines are also showing increased interest in curated F&B pairings and signature products that emphasize provenance and authenticity. In many cases, this includes bringing well-known consumer brands onboard while also introducing local or niche products that reflect the airline's identity.

dnata recently expanded its collaboration with [Aer Lingus](#) in Ireland, introducing a refreshed onboard retail experience built around a curated mix of recognizable global brands and locally inspired products tailored to the airline's routes and passenger base. Padgett notes the importance of balancing trusted products with more niche options to add authenticity.

Passenger preferences are also influencing menu development. Airlines are increasingly requesting wellness-focused options such as lighter meals and plant-forward dishes, although these must be carefully integrated to ensure reliability across complex catering operations.

"At dnata, we help airlines translate passenger trends into premium solutions that actually work at scale," Padgett says.

At the same time, many airlines are seeking to integrate catering and retail more closely, creating a cohesive passenger experience rather than treating the two areas as separate service elements.



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“Food, beverages and retail items are curated together so quality, presentation and brand messaging are aligned,” Padgett says of the shift.

Behind the scenes, data is playing a larger role in shaping onboard retail strategies. dnata’s retail platform supports more than 40 million onboard transactions annually and manages a global retail stock portfolio valued at more than US\$200 million, helping airlines analyze performance and refine product selection.

“Our focus is on practical, execution-led digital tools rather than experimental tech,” Padgett says. “The data helps us understand what is selling, when and why—and that insight feeds directly back into menu refinement and retail decisions.”

Looking ahead to WTCE, dnata plans to highlight how this integrated approach supports both passenger experience and commercial performance.

“Airlines are asking us to support brand expression, not just supply,” Padgett says. “Food, retail and service rituals all come together to reinforce their identity and elevate the end-to-end passenger experience.”