Q&A with Richard Wake: Identity and its impact on consumer behaviours

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Richard Wake, Insight & Innovation Director, En Route International

Richard Wake, Insight & Innovation Director at En Route International recently spoke to *PAX International* about consumer purchasing decisions and the impact this may have on why passengers opt to select special meals. Among other things, he highlights in this Q&A how lifestyle choices and generational trends have a large influence in this decision making.

PAX International: **Personalization was a major theme at WTCE 2023. Do personalization, individualism and personal expression still play important roles in consumer behaviour?**

Richard Wake: Identity strongly influences product decision making so we are still very much focused on personalization by building relationships beyond transactions, enhancing the passenger journey through better understanding travellers on an individual level. Individualism and aspirational design remain important, but with a new emphasis on budgeting.

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Consumers' self-image is reflected in the food they consume. When they do a food shop, they will naturally gravitate towards products that align with their personality, values and self-worth. This can be seen in consumers purchasing premium products to portray a luxury lifestyle, or sustainability-conscious consumers purchasing more eco-friendly products.

Data shows that 80 percent of 18 to 34-year-olds in the U.S. say that they are willing to pay more for sustainable products. A fifth of 25 to 44-year-olds in the U.K. say they "try to buy sustainable packaging whatever the cost."

Personalization, individualism and personal expression are vital for engaging Gen Z and millennials, who together form the largest passenger cohort. These generations value genuine connections with brands, products and services that align with their values and allow them to express their personality.



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PAX International: **So how does this relate to special meals—are lifestyle meals, such as vegetarian and vegan, here to stay?**

Wake: There is an increase in passengers choosing special meals as a lifestyle choice or a form of self-expression. This will potentially increase complexities for caterers and crew to manage product variation and services. Developing intelligent ways to help reduce these challenges will be key to providing more personalized choice onboard in the future.

While the rate of growth of veganism has slowed, many are still making the lifestyle change across the world. Since the vegan explosion in recent years, many consumers have since been put off by comparatively higher prices and concerns about the unhealthiness of ultra-processed vegan

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substitutes. Therefore, it is vitally important for food companies to ensure that their vegan or vegetarian options offer quality ingredients in line with other options. It is worth noting that, as trends evolve, there will be other lifestyle choices that will need to be accommodated as they emerge.

At least 55 percent of respondents in a global consumer survey of Gen Z, millennials and Gen X agreed that they would stop buying products from a brand if their values did not align with their personal views. Millennials are opting for flexitarian and low-carb diets and prioritizing nutrient-dense, locally produced, fresh foods that are protein-rich, lower sugar and clean-label. According to Statista, millennials in the U.K., for example, are the most likely to follow a flexitarian and a low- or no-carb diet when it came to any kind of nutritional rules.

PAX International: **Are environmental considerations important?**

Wake: Eco-friendliness is crucial for millennials, with nearly 80 percent saying that being eco-friendly is a way to improve their quality of life. They want to see plant-based alternatives and will often seek a meal that has a unique story to tell, or food that reflects individualism and creativity.

Gen Z are leveraging technology and viewing food as medicine, with mental health topping their wellness concerns. Their openness to plant-based diets and global culinary exploration—expressing their identity through global food cultures and flavours with respect and authenticity—is reshaping food trends, expanding accessibility and demand beyond their native regions.

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