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# Guest Column: Focus on essentials

By **Stathis Kefallonitis** on | Aviation Trends



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Contactless travel aids like face recognition will comfort travelers nervous about flying in a post-COVID-19 environment

A priority for airlines in the days and weeks to come will be to recognize and thank passengers for their loyalty. Rewarding passengers for their continuous business in a tangible way becomes way more important than what it was before the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.

As an example, offering incentives: [American Airlines](#) was among the first carriers to offer loyalty bonuses for passengers that booked travel within a given timeframe.

Furthermore, this is not the time to reduce the product offering. A lot of airlines in the name of 'safety' have eliminated or reduced service dramatically. Security and safety are taken for granted. Passengers do not expect any incidents when they fly. That is why they have selected to fly with a given carrier. There are ways to still provide exceptional and memorable service by keeping employees and customers safe.

No passenger would want to continue flying (or fly more) if the product is not the same or better! Oil prices are at an all-time low yet tickets in certain parts of the world are still unusually high and service is gone.

With business travel reduced, a lot of that revenue would come from independent passengers, small business owners, etc. No passengers in these categories will continue being loyal if there is no value in travel experience.

This is the time to go beyond expectations. Improving passenger loyalty cannot be achieved by the things that airlines were doing previously. Revisiting the passenger contact points provides an avenue.

### **An opportunity to excel**

Incorporating the latest technology can help shape-up the future of air-travel. This is the time to 'attack' passengers with love and demonstrate ultimate care. Being genuine, trustworthy and compassionate speaks loudly to passengers. This passenger care can be translated as doing something extraordinary for those loyal passengers. This can be in a form of a new initiative that makes headlines. A good example is the [Private Room by Singapore Airlines](#). A distinctive lounge within a lounge that offers room for customization, privacy, and comfort. American Express is revamping their first ever [AMEX Centurion lounge in Las Vegas](#). The expansion is taking into consideration the post COVID-19 limitations and reflects the changing needs of popular travelers. *Editor's Note: Both lounges are currently closed but plans are to re-open soon.*

The last few years we have seen an increase in contactless airport infrastructure from self-check-in, to self-passport scan, to biometric terminals. These are gradually being enhanced. We will see a greater influx and variety of these that is going to be implemented at airports around the world.

Contactless transactions are here to stay, and these will be further enhanced with eye-tracking and face-recognition techniques as part of biometric terminals that are getting implemented.

Airline and airport regulators have made advances so that we can build on successes and create safe and seamless experiences. Combining these developments with progress in connectivity can be very useful.



The American Express Centurion Lounge at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas

### **Perception of risk**

In uncertain times, passengers need travel brands that they can rely on. Having faith in dependable airlines — that are there for passengers — helps strengthen loyalty. Relying on reputable airline brands provides less surprises and risks.

Dependable airlines should not only project lifestyle characteristics of being safe and reliable but become airlines that enhance passenger lives. Promoting an unrealistic and unattainable lifestyle may hurt the airline brand in the long term. A reliable and realistic airline brand helps me live more responsibly by recycling, by customizing my onboard experience, by using my feedback to create a better flying experience.

### **Loyalty**

This is certainly the time to be proactive rather than reactive. Making positive news and leading in the travel industry is perceived as a good thing. When a company is making changes to accommodate the changing needs of passengers, it is instantly compared with competitors. The airline that does something first or goes beyond the call of duty to help, will be remembered. Taking the necessary steps to create value by implementing changes is perceived positively by passengers.

Airlines that take the lead and reward or aid passengers earn their loyalty. Being there during times of crisis translates to immeasurable customer loyalty.

Loyalty goes both ways and is not only the benefit of airlines. Passengers may well switch carriers if they feel that their loyalty is not being appreciated.

### **The 'new' tomorrow**

A large majority of travelers will be price-sensitive in the new travel normalcy. Passengers will be looking for the next big deal when planning trips. These price-sensitive passengers are more likely to be purchasing additional services when they fly in economy class (additional luggage allowance, buy-on-board, etc.). This pay-as-you-go concept is not new but needs to be revisited to create greater value. Creating bundles that may speak of value would help airlines sell additional buy-on-board services.

One-off premium-class fare purchases may be more common as passengers may be more selective. Identifying flying segments that are more likely to be booked in Business/First will allow airlines to plan accordingly (fleet, onboard services, etc.).

Many travelers may continue to use frequent flyer miles, credit card points, promotions, and/or a mix of all the aforementioned. Airlines can plan experiences that can be purchased using miles and money offering passengers greater choice and variety of services.

It is often the little things that may bring back happy memories of flying. The stronger those memories, the stronger the engagement with passengers. Stocking memories is what keeps an airline brand alive. Providing emotionally-charged travel experiences help passengers relive those memories and strengthen the airline brand.