

Bringing the "WOW" factor back to air travel

This is a special feature from *PAX International's* [June 2023 WTCE issue](#) on [page 48](#).



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Air travel remains the most luxurious form of travel. “It’s the only way to get anywhere in the world in 24 hours,” panellist Anne de Hauw, Founder of [IN Air Travel Experience](#), says. But beyond the convenience of speed, there are many touchpoints that give passengers the opportunity to be impressed as they move from point A to point B. As the airline industry moves away from recovery and catapults forward into a new age of innovation, *PAX International* spoke to key industry leaders to get a good understanding of what this new “wow” factor might look like.

“Luxury has a different meaning for different people,” Marisa Pitsch, Chief Customer Experience Officer at [FORMIA](#) says. Though fundamentally “speed and convenience” play the largest roles, she sees the opportunity for “soft touches” to influence how memorable air travel can become.

These soft touches can be made at multiple points in a passenger’s journey — even before they board. For example, Pitsch sees airport lounges as “a wonderful opportunity of dedicated space for branded experiences.”

In the past three years, Kelly Stevenson, [JetVine](#) Brand Consultant and former British Airways Global Wine and Beverages Manager, has noticed airlines saying that people are spending much longer in lounges.

In order to maximize the potential for that longer wait time to be a net positive, “people are creating experiences within the lounge that maybe are a bit more entertaining, and a bit more theatrical than previously,” Stevenson says. Personalization — a major theme in the roundtable discussion — has a place here.

In the amenity kit space, Pitsch can see a day where passengers make a choice before they board an aircraft about what goes in their kit. This could happen digitally, as seat and meal selection already do.

For Sean Wheaton, Vice President of Culinary at [Cuisine Solutions](#), digitization is the answer that will give passengers the opportunity to make choices ahead of time. Choice comes down to “empowering the guest,” he says.

Inflight impressions

From her time at British Airways, Stevenson remembers that passenger feedback was almost always related to the level of service they received from cabin crew. “If something was a bit off on the day in terms of delays, or if there was perhaps not their first choice of food, if the crew delivered a good service, and if [the passenger] felt like they were wanted and they were being accepted onto that plane at that time — that was the crux of a good or a bad flight.”

De Hauw agrees. “I think the human experience prevails over anything else,” she says. “The interaction with customers is the number one KPI in hospitality.”

It can be small things that make a difference. “Everybody appreciates hospitality,” Wheaton says, detailing how an extra bag of pretzels or an additional blanket for a crying baby can go a long way. “People just want to know that their dietary needs are being thought about and that there’s not a one-size-fits-all approach, no matter what goes on in the cabin or in the lounge.”

On the beverage side, “consumers are telling the airlines they want something different,” Stevenson says. “There’s a huge shift in the US and Europe to non-alcoholic products. Rather than just a standard soft drink, people are looking to more complex non-alcoholic drinks that they can have in the air which is an environment where they do get dehydrated.”

She continues: “If airlines can offer an experience that offers more choice and can offer something similar to what passengers would get in a nice restaurant or a fun bar then there is potential to marry the hospitality experience.”

Stevenson sees that the inflight beverage industry is in “an innovative growth phase.” Part of this growth is understanding that “consistency goes alongside innovation.” One example she cites of this consistency is Delta Air Lines adoption of ready-to-drink cocktails. It “means you’re going to have the perfect serve every time and you are giving the cabin crew the tools to not have the complication of making up and mixing a cocktail in a potentially turbulent environment,” she explains.

Both Wheaton and Stevenson note a rise in the popularity of buy-on-board options.

Telling the story

“Today’s passengers take great design and amenities as a given,” de Hauw says. “What they are looking for instead is something that is original and meaningful, something that delights them, broadens their horizon and opens their minds. Choice and personalization are the answer to that.”

In response, Pitsch says FORMIA’s clients are moving into an innovative space where different types of offerings are in the works that make passengers feel like their own personal desires are being met on board, especially on medium- to long-haul flights. A one-size-fits-all approach may no longer be the only way to present a kit. “Certainly, everyone has their own definition of comfort onboard and while one may prefer socks, others may prefer an eye mask,” Pitsch says.

Personalization could be brought to a place where it happens on board, in Premium Cabins, “in the form of selecting right then and there what it is that you would like to fill an amenity kit with — it’s all in the presentation and service delivery,” Pitsch says. In terms of sharing the story of a brand or partnership, Pitsch sees a move towards including QR codes in kits, which often “lead into the universe of a brand.” Because there is limited real estate on packaging, a digital tie-in has the chance to “connect that passenger with the story of the brand and add more perceived value to the passenger experience.”

The amenity kits that are coupled with a recognizable name “really do offer both parties added perceived value,” she says, adding that there may be a possibility to one day have “wellness ambassadors” inflight in a similar way to recognizable “flying chefs.” There is also a chance here to tie in the sustainability story of a product as well, Pistch says.

Wheaton sees that a curated, branded experience is also returning as a trend on the catering side of the industry.

It’s another “opportunity for storytelling, another opportunity to tell not only the story of the ingredients but the story of how the chef decided to come up with what that meal requires in terms of training for that onboard staff,” he says. When passengers want to know more, a good tie-in he sees could be to “tell the story of the chef in the onboard magazine.”

To watch the entirety of the roundtable, [visit PAX International’s YouTube channel](#).