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Health equals wealth: the benefits of Pax wellbeing

The view many people take of flying is that it involves sitting in a cramped space for many hours at 38,000 feet and eating poor quality food. Inevitably some passengers will suffer from flying-related anxieties and phobias.

By recognising these issues, it is possible to find a solution to improve passenger wellbeing, which offers the potential to increase yields and ancillary revenues.

Wellbeing

According to Clinical Psychologist and Anxiety Treatment Specialist, Dr Martin Seif: “Remarkably fear of crashing is not a primary fear. The primary fear is commonly claustrophobia, as passengers feel they are trapped in the aircraft. Being confined in a metal tube can mean people prefer flying on widebody aircraft because it reduces the claustrophobic feeling.”

Airlines are constantly finding more creative ways to fit more passengers in an aircraft without increasing its size. This densification approach has a negative effect by reducing passenger wellbeing and increasing anxiety. “When passengers feel claustrophobic, they are afraid that their fear will overcome them,” says Dr Seif. “Throughout the flight they are constantly afraid that they will experience a moment of panic or outburst of emotional discomfort.”

Many airlines are now taking passenger anxiety into account. They understand that passenger wellbeing is becoming increasingly important, and are asking their aircraft interior designers to try to create a spacious effect inside the aircraft. Yet many airlines are taking the opposite approach.

Cabin densification involves using slimmer seats and installing them closer together by reducing pitch to have more seat rows in an aircraft. This means that airlines can increase revenues at the

expense of passenger wellbeing and comfort.

The 32-inch seat pitch was common in economy, but most airlines have reduced this number to 30-31 inches, with extreme examples of 28 inches. Thinner seats give the impression of the same amount of room while sitting, so seat manufacturers are looking at the possibility of reducing seat pitch further by prototyping seats with 27-inch pitch.

Originally the 777 was configured as a nine-seat abreast economy cabin. Several years after its introduction into service, however, many airlines were using 10-abreast as the economy cabin configuration.

In 2004, Boeing’s original marketing material for the 787 Dreamliner featured an eight-seat abreast economy class. This was the same two-four-two-abreast arrangement of the standard Airbus widebody economy cabin. The 787, however, has an 18-foot wide cabin, so the 787 would provide economy class passengers more width than an A300-600, A300 or A340. A high number of 787 operators now configure it with a nine-seat abreast configuration.

Passenger anxiety

“The results of cramming more people into a confined space is that some passengers become aware that they have a limited amount of head space,” says Dr Seif. “This makes them more susceptible to claustrophobia.”

Airlines can improve passenger wellbeing and lower anxiety by installing more comprehensive inflight entertainment systems (IFE).

“IFE is proven to lower passenger anxiety, because it provides a distraction to make the flight a more ordinary experience,” says Dr Seif. “I have lots of patients who only fly because the aircraft operated by their choice of airline has in-built WiFi to allow them to keep in touch with their friends and family while they

are airborne.”

Additionally, connectivity enables passengers to be more up to date with work. Being in touch with the outside world means business passengers do not miss important e-mails, nor are they overwhelmed with them when they land.

IFE can, however, have its disadvantages if it is out of service. Anxious passengers can then feel disconnected and begin to panic. Furthermore, seat manufacturers have noted that consumer ratings for the same seat with the same pitch improves with inclusion of connectivity and IFE because of its distracting qualities. This means any passenger could suffer a reduction in wellbeing in the event of an IFE outage.

Passenger anxiety can be increased by how the aircraft cabin is pressurised when flying at altitude. The reduced air pressure when flying in a pressurised aircraft can feel unnatural to many passengers.

“It is a combination of claustrophobia and acrophobia, which is fear of heights,” says Dr Seif. “The sense of acrophobia is increased because the cylindrical cabin is synonymous with aircraft and flying, and many passengers therefore get anxious looking down this big round tube.”

On some of the newer aircraft, the ceiling and the floor meet in such a way that it feels less circular. According to Dr Seif, widebody aircraft are more box like, which is better for anxious passengers. “Smaller and older aircraft cabins have an appearance of roundness that many anxious people do not like.”

Sounds also play their part for those passengers that are hyper-vigilant for sound. What do the crew communication bells mean? Do the crew look happy or concerned about something? If there is a lot of implicit reassurance, why is the captain telling us we have turbulence?

Crew communications solutions that silently send notifications and alerts to flight attendants’ personal electronic



devices (PEDs) can help.

“Some of my patients hate the fact that the lighting changes, and they feel that the environment is too artificial,” says Dr Seif. Implementing the latest light emitting diode (LED) technology, makes it possible to personalise cabin lighting to suit the individual.

“The airline industry is getting bashed for not doing enough for people who have certain phobias,” says Dr Seif. “If an airline accommodates phobias and acknowledges they exist, it might increase the number of travellers willing to travel with it.”

Yet Dr Seif agrees that airlines often view passenger anxiety and wellbeing differently for commercial reasons. According to airline marketers, it is thought to be bad for business to acknowledge any associations of anxiety or publish steps taken by a company to lower it.

Currently airline marketing focuses on tangible things like comfort, seating and business-class luxuries. All these things, however, are negated if airlines do not take into account intangible things such as passenger anxiety and wellbeing, and the sensory experience.

Cabin pressure

Using clever marketing, it is possible for airlines to target passengers with solutions that will help them feel in better shape when they arrive at their destination. Before they can do this, however, they need to understand the effects of flying on the body.

The only advantage of densification for passengers’ wellbeing is the positive effect it has on the moisture content in the air. Average humidity levels in an

aircraft’s cabin are one-eighth of what they are on the ground. When there are more people in the cabin, humidity is improved due to moisture expelled from passengers as they breathe.

“Ironically the people who pay more for first-class and business-class experience the worst conditions in terms of humidity,” says CTT vice president of sales and marketing, Peter Landquist. “The main contributors to increasing humidity within the aircraft are the passengers themselves, and the galley when meals are cooked.”

Poor humidity levels are caused by the very dry atmospheric condition of air at altitude, which is bled into the cabin. About 40-50% of the cabin air is recirculated, a process which traps some of the available moisture produced in it. Yet the resultant humidity levels are nevertheless extremely low at 14-15% in economy class, 7-10% in business class, and 4-7% in first class.

According to research, the ideal comfort zone for humidity is 20-60%. Levels lower than 10% lead to extreme dehydration.

Exposing passengers to very low levels of humidity over a prolonged period makes them dehydrated. “Because human beings are made of water, being exposed to very dry air means that passengers will dehydrate from every pore as the body naturally adjusts to its environment,” says Landquist. “This is exacerbated when passengers sleep, because during that time they are not taking on the extra fluids needed.”

It is suggested that the average person will lose up to 70 grams of water per hour, or more if they are nervous.

Active humidifiers increase the humidity to 20-25%.

Smaller lavatories and slimmer seats mean many airlines are finding more imaginative ways to put more seats onto an aircraft. Passenger claustrophobia and anxiety levels can be reduced by IFE and connectivity because of its distracting effect.

Hydration & food types

Noticeable side effects on the body due to flying in a pressurised cabin include fatigue, brain-fog, insomnia, digestive problems and joint and muscle pain. Passengers will feel noticeably worse if they do not eat or drink properly either during flight or before.

Reports highlight the biggest impact on passenger health is dehydration. According to clinical psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) and nutrition consultant Adele Wolstenhulme, over a 10-hour flight a man can lose up to 2.0 litres of fluid, and a woman 1.5 litres. Passengers can therefore feel terrible when they arrive at their destination.

“Evidence suggests that even a 1-2% decrease in hydration, can have a significant impact on human health. This may affect your mood, memory and reduce critical thinking capability,” says Wolstenhulme. “Tiredness, dry eyes, itchy skin, irritability and constipation are also effects of dehydration.”

The very dry cabin environment means that the risk of catching a virus increases significantly. This is because dehydration affects the function of mucous membranes that line the nasal cavity, lowering the ability to trap bacteria. According to Wolstenhulme, it is possible that mucous membranes will not regain full functionality until 48 hours after a flight.

Therefore, it is not only possible to easily catch a virus while on the aircraft, but also while in transit through a busy airport terminal when travellers come into close contact with others from different parts of the world.

Poor digestion and bloating are another symptom of flying. “In an aircraft at altitude the gut becomes highly sensitive, because the decrease in air pressure initiates the body to shut down its non-essential functions so that it can concentrate on the essential,” says Wolstenhulme.

Typical cabin pressurisation is set at 8,000ft above sea level for legacy aircraft, such as the 777 and 747-400. Next generation aircraft, such as the 787 and A350, have increased the cabin air pressure to reflect a lower altitude of 6,000ft above sea level.

“It is only a 2,000ft difference, but it makes a big difference,” says

Increasingly passengers are becoming more conscious of the types of food that they are putting into their bodies. Offering health food options will not only appeal to these passengers, but also ensure that they arrive at their destination in the best possible shape.

Wolstenhulme. “I think the important thing is for original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to achieve a cabin altitude as close as possible to sea level.”

Issues due to dehydration and gut sensitivity are compounded because the body is in an unusual and constricted space. Furthermore, it’s common for passengers to suffer from anxiety about missing connecting flights, for example. This further induces the body into ‘flight or fight’ stress mode.

“When the body is in ‘flight or fight’, digestion is compromised and heart and lung function increases,” explains Wolstenhulme. “Eating poor quality food isn’t the best thing you can do for your body if you want to arrive in good shape at your destination. But you need to be mindful that even some foods offered onboard that are promoted as ‘healthier options’ may be loaded with hidden nasties in the form of additives and preservatives.”

Bloating results during and after a flight because gas gets trapped in the bowel, which expands at increased altitude, causing discomfort and constipation on landing, potentially disrupting the gut’s friendly bacteria.

In promoting passenger wellbeing, Wolstenhulme adds that airlines could be more conscious about the ingredients included in inflight meals and the negative effects these may have on travellers. Through clever marketing airlines could even promote menu options that may help offset symptoms to ‘beat the bloat’.

A study by Lufthansa Airlines found that perception of sweet and salty foods drops by up to 30% thanks to low humidity and reduced air pressure. To make inflight meals taste better, lots of sugar and salt are added. Yet the irony is that increasing the salt and sugar content of meals further exacerbates dehydration.

“Most airlines are missing out on a huge opportunity with respect to products and services that they can sell for the benefit of the passenger,” says Wolstenhulme. “At WTCE in Hamburg I asked airlines during a Taste of Travel session whose responsibility it should be for promoting passenger health. You could hear a pin drop with the lack of response. Yet the commercial opportunities for ancillary revenues could be huge if they get both product selection



and messaging right. Some airlines are beginning to see the potential in healthier food choices, but they promote them a boring way.”

There is a wealth of foods that contain less fat, salt and sugar and are naturally tasty. Sea vegetables and sushi are just two examples of unprocessed foods rich in protein. It is possible for airlines to create healthy menus that cater to the diverse mix of travelling nationalities.

“It is time airlines align themselves with qualified health professionals to create exciting menus that improve passenger wellness during the flight and after,” says Wolstenhulme. “Furthermore airlines could benefit from tapping into the multi-million-dollar health industry, so everybody wins.”

Increasingly, a new generation of travellers is better aware of the benefits of certain food types and specialist diets. By the way of airline applications (apps), operators can offer pre-order solutions that best cater to passengers’ individual dietary requirements.

Grab is an app-based retail delivery service at airports. The service allows travellers to view and order all the available food options, and then collect their food or have it delivered at the gate.

“An airline doesn’t have to miss out on spend. Grab has proven there are big wins for all through partnership, as evidenced with American Airlines and Dallas Fort Worth airport,” explains Wolstenhulme. “Services like this mean that passengers can order their food from recognised and trusted vendors.

Changing to healthier food options allows airlines to increase passenger wellbeing and helps them arrive at their destination in better shape. Greater

improvements can be made through presentation and service.

Yates and Partners

Yates and Partners are a consultancy that focuses on airline passenger experience and design, development and implementation.

One of the problems they see is that many passengers receive poor hospitality thanks to a crew philosophy that dictates getting meals out as quickly as possible.

“Passengers are the victim of the cart that comes down the aisle, and God help if you ask a question and stop the whole process,” says Keith Yates, executive chairman, at Yates & Partners. “Our view is that we can change all that, but we have to change the mindset of everybody involved, from crew members to senior airline management.”

According to Yates, food tastes better when you are given good hospitality. It is also possible to improve passengers’ perception of economy-class dining without changing the menu. Called Deconstructed Dining, meals are served in stylish, individual bowls that give the impression of a bistro experience, instead of a standard airline tray.

“When we trialled the service, passengers were mesmerised by how it is possible to serve 300 people in economy without a tray,” says Yates. “Also using beautifully-styled dishes makes passengers feel they are dining in a restaurant.”

By deconstructing the economy dining experience, it is possible to remove 11-20 items from the food tray, not all of which improve passengers’ experience.

Delta Airlines has been trialling the deconstructed service for about two



years. Seeing an increase in net promoter scores (NPS), the airline is expected to launch the service soon on its entire fleet.

NPS scores before and after the trial can be compared. These are a very reliable source of information that measures how the passenger rates their experience. NPS scores are widely used in the industry as a customer satisfaction tool because they have a good level of objectivity. It is possible to analyse how an airline performed two years ago, for example, and how it performs on that same route today. NPS can also be used to see how individual airlines compare.

“The real value, and why airlines are obsessed with NPS, is that it is a measure of a customer’s willingness to return. If the experience is so poor, few will return and then you are on the path to bankruptcy,” says Yates. “Airlines that are running negative NPS scores should be very concerned, since it costs them more to get customers, mainly by fare discounting.”

When NPS ratings rise, it is a clear sign that passengers are saying that this service is so good that they will come back. Moreover, NPS is an important measure for an airline’s future, since it correlates to profitability. Many airlines have done studies where it is possible to calculate the value of each single point increase or reduction in NPS.

Yates says a Middle East airline uses the deconstructed service on several of its routes, and has seen a massive increase in NPS scores. Airlines have also noticed higher yields on the routes that are running the deconstructed dining service. According to data, competitors are experiencing a decline in yield on the same routes.

“They are getting higher demand,”

says Yates. “If you are going to run this service you have to be sure that you can price up a little. An adjustment of a few dollars will get the improvement in passenger yield. You clearly need to get the payback for improving the service.”

The crew response to the deconstructed service is positive, because crew members do not have to bend down and pick food out of a cart, as they do with tray service.

With deconstructed service, all the plates are on top of the cart, so cabin crew are clearing by tipping, which means they are not constantly bending their backs. Overall this improves cabin crew morale, making staff better placed to improve passenger wellbeing.

“Cabin crew no longer have to come along and clear your tray by bending down and putting it back into the cart,” says Yates. “If you are looking after 50 passengers, that means you will be bending down 100 times to take out and put back trays.”

Providing genuine hospitality and giving the passengers a sense of inclusion by recognising them will make them feel a little more important. This approach will naturally lower passengers’ stress levels, resulting in better wellbeing. Therefore, they value the journey.

Dine on demand

Changing the approach to airline dining is a service called ‘Dine on Demand’. Yates and Partners has created a large and diverse menu that is presented to passengers shortly after take-off. The concept is that they can order what they want, when they want.

After successful trials over the past two years, an Asian carrier has now

Better hospitality is proven to increase customer ratings and passengers perception of an airline. Without changing the menu and by offering a bistro style dining experience means that passengers will enjoy their inflight meal more.

implemented Dine on Demand.

For example, the Dine on Demand menu has three types of all-day breakfast, and includes everything from comfort food to a la carte dining. There are many different styles, such as Mediterranean and Asian, and even cheese boards.

“We present the menu to the passenger and say ‘any dish any time’,” says Yates. Passengers have a large choice of options, including to eat as little or as much as they want.

Yates and Partners has adopted a kit-approach. Each kit is a dish for a passenger. If a traveller wants steak-and-kidney pie and mash, there is a foil for this. The crew will just pull that foil out and put it in the oven, lift the garnish out and put that on the side.

The crew use a digital directory to make it easy to find the kits on the carts. Storing food in kit form makes it possible to switch things.

“With Dine on Demand, we have calculated that we only need to load an average of 1.8 meals per person. Often passengers on long flights eat less,” says Yates. “What you find is that they have a substantial dining experience and, for the rest of the flight, they snack on comfort food. Passengers do not necessarily want two big meals on a long flight.”

Summary

Improvements in technology mean it is becoming increasingly possible to personalise the passenger experience, and for airlines to focus on improving individual passenger wellbeing. The logic is that if a passenger is feeling relaxed, refreshed and well when they arrive at their destination, then they are likely to travel with that airline again.

Wellness apps that inform passengers when to drink, eat, sleep and exercise are becoming increasingly popular with passengers. It is even possible to incorporate a wellness app into a customer loyalty programme. Once the passenger has downloaded the wellness app it will be possible to target them with suitable offers and reward points.

In an industry where many things are commoditised, now is the time to start thinking about commoditising passenger wellbeing.

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