



# Carriers go soft

Raymond Kollau reports on the softer elements being added to the inflight experience



Besides introducing bigger and better premium seats and smarter and lighter designs in Economy, mood lighting, roomier cabins and improved air quality, one of the major developments today sees airlines investing in the ‘softer’ elements of the inflight experience. From customisation to real-time information and virtual classes, here are some of the major trends in onboard hospitality.

### Personal service

In the past year, airlines such as Emirates, British Airways, Iberia, KLM and EVA Air have equipped their pursers with tablets. This allows the cabin crew to see which previous

trips a passenger has taken with the carrier before and, based on this, know their food, wine and seating preferences, or any issues a customer had during their previous travels. This enables crew to offer a more personal and relevant service to frequent flyers.

Obviously, the next step is to connect the crew tablets to the internet as the availability of aircraft with onboard wifi grows. This will close the customer service loop for airlines, as they will be able to connect with crew and passengers up in the air. For example, iPads used by pursers onboard British Airways’ Business Class-only service between London City Airport and New York’s

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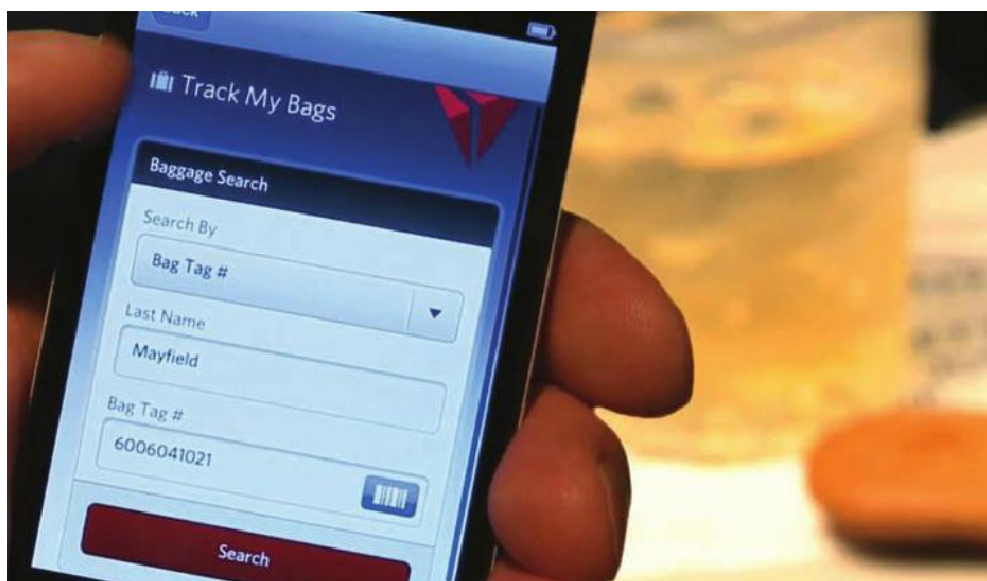
JFK receive live updates throughout the flight, thanks to the aircraft’s inflight connectivity provided by OnAir. It should only be a matter of time before airlines such as Emirates – which already offers connectivity on the majority of its fleet and has equipped its pursers with HP Elitepad devices – will follow.



### Real-time information

Within the next five to six years it can be fully expected for real-time customer service to be an industry standard. With the rise of passenger smartphone use, in-flight connectivity and airlines' commitment to mobile technologies and social media, soon customers will be able to evaluate every aspect of their experience in real-time, thus enabling issues to be corrected on the spot.

For example, Delta passengers on domestic flights can use Delta's smartphone app to track their checked baggage with the bag tag number that they received at the time of baggage check-in. Since Delta has equipped all its domestic aircraft with GoGo's in-flight internet passengers can check whether their bag has made it on their flight while they are up in the air.



### Human touch

Airlines such as Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific and ANA make a difference by adding small and personal touches often seen in the hotel industry to their onboard service. Cathay Pacific and ANA crew, for instance, often welcome passengers onboard with a small handwritten note, while passengers travelling in Singapore Airlines' first-class suite find a small card that says "This suite has been specially cleaned and dressed by ..." in their private cabin.

Meanwhile, Air Canada's new discount airline, Rouge, is calling in Disney to help train their flight attendants. The airline says it looked at several top customer service

providers, with Disney being the most comprehensive and in line with Rouge's aim to create a very different and service-focused culture.

### Virtual classes

Besides the traditional cabin classes, airlines are experimenting with cabin zones where like-minded passengers are seated together. For example, passengers flying Virgin Atlantic's Upper Class have the option to book a 'snooze-zone' seat, which will locate them at the front of the Business cabin. After take-off the cabin lights are immediately dimmed and no meal is offered by cabin staff to allow for maximum sleep time. Instead, passengers can choose to take their meal on the ground in the Virgin lounge prior to their take-off.

AirAsia X has created a 'Quiet Zone', which is located in the Economy cabin at the front end of the aircraft



**Left:** British Airways makes more of iPads and Singapore Airlines leaves personal notes. **Above, from top:** Delta's smart bag tracking; Rouge gets Disney style; and Eva Air gets connected. **Below:** Emirates crews take the tablet and Delta gets Heavenly.

and bars kids younger than 12 years old. Malaysia Airlines has created a similar 'kids-free zone' in the Economy section on the upper deck of its A380s.

On a related note, airlines such as KLM, Finnair, Iberia, and airBaltic have introduced social seating schemes that allow passengers to pick seat mates with similar interests before their flight by linking their personal Facebook and LinkedIn profiles to their seat number.

### Branded amenities

Airlines are increasingly teaming up with successful companies from other sectors to design elements of the passenger experience. Although branded amenities aren't a new feature on board airlines – think amenity kits from luxury brands such as Bulgari, Ferragamo, and La Prairie – the number of branded products in recent years has expanded to other parts of the inflight experience.

Examples include Nespresso coffee served in First Class on SWISS or Bose headphones in First on many airlines. Korean Air has teamed up with Absolut Vodka for its A380 onboard bars, while Delta has partnered with Westin Hotels to offer passengers in Business an inflight version of Westin's 'Heavenly Bed' pillows and comforters.

