

The next step

Building a stronger brand can help develop a world-class airport, writes Interbrand Cologne's managing director, Nina Oswald.

Today, travellers expect more from airports. Factors such as safety, promptness, and cleanliness – even a premium infrastructure and good technical services – are no longer enough to elevate an airport into the ranks of top airports worldwide.

In fact, I would go as far to say that these are now minimum standards all airports are expected to meet.

As such, customer expectations are transforming the airport sector. For one thing, despite our growing reliance on digital platforms and modes of interaction, the need for physical transportation is increasing around the world.

From the changing transportation requirements of a rising middle class in Asia to dramatic surges in tourism related travel, the mobility mega trend is only getting bigger.

Case in point: According to statistics released by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), more than one billion tourists travelled outside their countries' borders in 2012 alone – a rise of 20 million tourists over 2011 and a new record in international tourism. So, what do airports have to do to make a lasting positive impression on all these travellers?

The new world of mobility is full of opportunity

Driving this sea change is a broader shift in the transportation industry. In today's inter-connected (and more complicated) world, most travellers can no longer rely on a single mobility solution – they require multiple services along their individual journey.

Airports and airlines, of course, are integral players in the new world of mobility, but so are car brands, long distance trains, buses and all other transportation systems.

These changing needs are pushing innovation, prompting new partnerships and putting pressure on airports to make nice-to-have features standard parts of holistic offers.

For example, collaborative consumption (car-sharing) and collaborative offerings (airport train) are becoming more and more important along the traveller's journey.

Partnering will become a critical success-factor for airports in the future, which is the case for brands in other sectors as well. Airports need to build partnerships that extend beyond airlines, technical suppliers and duty free retailers.



Diversifying will be key to not only building exclusive relationships with the world's leading airline brands, but also in creating unique and differentiating shopping and entertainment experiences. It will also help expand opportunities to line up partners in the region to build real estate, creating fresh new offerings.

Airports are no longer crossroads for people arriving from one destination and heading off to another. They have become an important and integrated part of mobile living. Proximity, therefore, is becoming increasingly important. People typically don't want to drive for more than an hour from their homes to get to an airport – they want the airport to move closer to where they're living and working.

Additionally, digital applications that interlink platforms also help meet the expectations of those who want to travel smarter and stay connected throughout the journey.

The truth is, the airport experience starts long before a traveller arrives at the terminal and doesn't end when the plane takes off. From comparing prices online and assessing quality of service through Yelp reviews to car services and air travel mobile apps that track itineraries, find flights, or help people make the most of a layover – it's all a constant feedback loop and part of the overall customer experience.



Airports need to understand that they have to deliver a comprehensive and unique experience – beyond their existing core-business and platforms. If customer experience is considered through this lens and executed against a strategic vision for what the brand represents, airports have the potential to revolutionise that experience.

Leveraging your brand

By looking beyond what airports have been and imagining what they could be, airports may be inspired to rethink their business models.

From a classic location-focused service provider to an international airport manager like Germany's Fraport, from a provider of airline traffic to a whole world of mega shopping like Dubai International or a complete world of its own like Singapore Changi, today's airports are taking on distinct qualities, attributes and personalities.

Already we can see that airports with a unique point-of-view and well-designed experiences for travellers have a stronger brand than the ones that don't. They stand apart by offering what no other airport can offer in quite the same way.

Changi, for instance, not only operates like a city within the city and provides outstanding shopping and entertainment options –

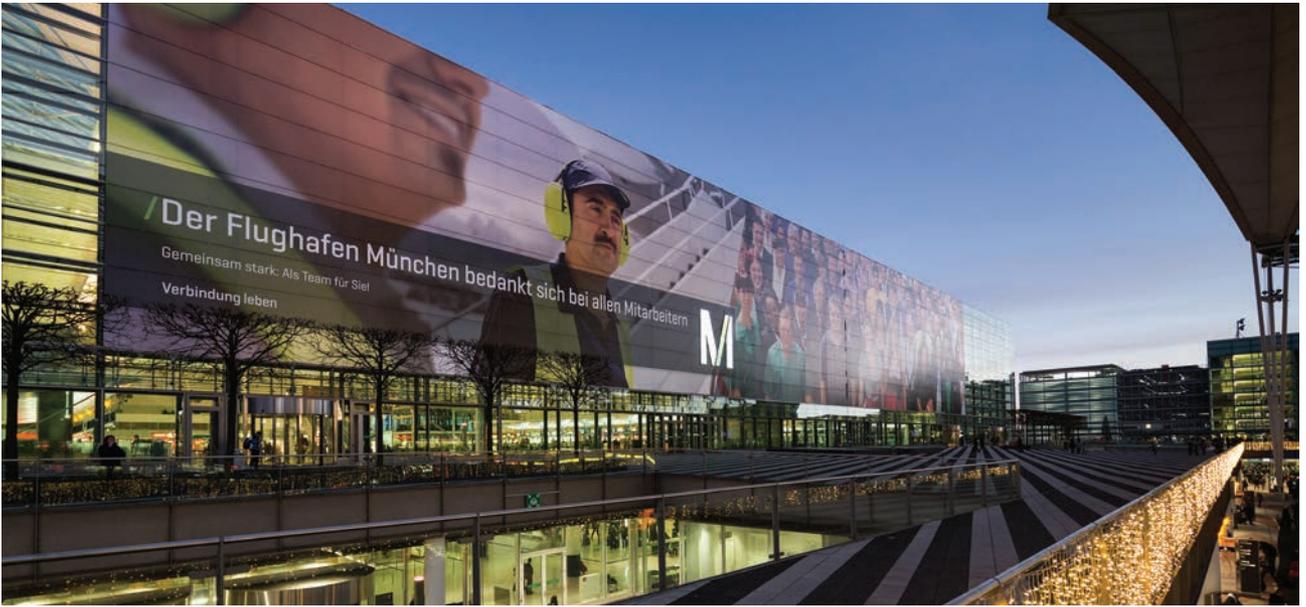
it offers a 360-premium experience that has reinvented what airports can be. With whirlpool baths and massage tables, rooftop bars, LAN gaming areas and free movie theaters, koi ponds and butterfly gardens, Changi is 'creating joy, wonder, delight' and bringing unparalleled comfort and luxury to travellers.

Other gateways such as Los Angeles and Copenhagen feature distinctive interior design, while Seoul's Incheon International Airport wows passengers with its bright architecture and exclusive, personalised services.

As these airports demonstrate, a strong brand is a key success factor in driving customer preference and securing future earnings, which is why brand building is becoming a bigger priority for many airports.

The ability to attract and retain employees is another major benefit in an industry that sometimes struggles with recruitment. In fact, building a strong brand as an employer – with highly motivated employees and an admired corporate culture – will become a major differentiator in the market, especially now that the sector is shifting its emphasis from infrastructures to people and service.

So, now that you know the value and benefits of a strong brand, here are five tips that can help your airport become – or remain – a world-class hub with serious brand recognition:



1. Find your brand's story and bring it to life

When it comes to differentiation, storytelling plays an important role. Stories capture the attention of travellers, but also influence B2B partners such as airlines, real estate investors and tenants who increasingly judge an airport's credibility, status, and success on the basis of the stories it tells.

For passengers, choosing to travel through London or Paris is a purchase decision. Similarly, an airline's commitment to a long-term hub contract or an investor's commitment to an airport-friendly real estate project, are also purchase decisions. Stories, without a doubt, influence those decisions.

Interbrand recently rebranded one of the world's top gateways, Munich Airport. This work involved refreshing the look and feel of an iconic logo that has endured for 20 years but, more specifically, it was about defining a unique brand proposition.

A brand proposition is a short, clear statement or simple idea that provides the rationale for choosing one brand over another. It also provides a central story that conveys the benefits and associations that set the brand apart to employees, customers, partners, shareholders and the wider public.

Nike, for instance, embodies the idea of performance, which is at the core of its storytelling – and drives everything the brand does. Another good example is BMW, which puts 'joy' at the heart of its story and is a sentiment that touches every aspect of the brand's image and communications, both internally and externally. Acting as a unifying thread and a guiding principle, a brand proposition helps to drive change within an organisation.

In a sector where delivering distinctive stories is becoming as important as delivering infrastructure, the Munich Airport sets itself apart by emphasising both its ability to meet global demand and to express local flavour.

The new claim, 'living ideas – connecting lives', puts collaboration at the heart of everything the airport does. Reflecting this concept, the visual identity is built around local distinctions and singular experiences. The cornerstone of the new identity, the logo, preserves the original form of the old 'M', with the right upstroke in the letter playing a fundamental role in terms of bringing the concept to life visually.

As a 'connector', this portion of the letter is a linking element within the M or between two words and symbolises the place where two lives join together, or where two stories find each other in one place. Used almost like a hashtag, this element visually reinforces the idea of connection that is so central to the rebranding concept.

Developed over the course of more than two years, the new brand was designed to strengthen the airport's already successful position among its global competitors, enhance its appeal among customers and partners, and boost its attractiveness as an employer.

As this example illustrates, a central story touches every aspect of a business, from organisational processes and leadership principles to products and communications.

2. Think about the customer experience

Airports don't have to be just temporary stops where people are content to grab a quick snack and magazine. They can be destinations that people look forward to visiting. Most travellers are in an airport for hours, sometimes close to an entire day or night. But are all airports taking advantage of the incredible opportunity they have to impress the masses of people who pass through?

Strong brands understand that the retail store, for instance, is a key point of access into the brand experience at large. How do some of the world's most beloved retail brands – Apple, Burberry, Nike, for example – drive choice and create loyalty?

They invite consumers into an experience. They integrate digital into that experience, and create hip, sophisticated, or playful environments (online and off), that bring the brand's values to life in engaging and memorable ways.

Airports must think creatively—and boldly—about how they can shift the traveller's experience from waiting out the hours in boredom to, "Wow, this airport is awesome! I would come here just to dine or shop!" In that sense, airports can, in fact, learn a lot from the world's most successful retailers.

So, conduct consumer research to find out whether your airport's offerings and atmosphere are perceived as generic and institutional or warm, friendly and one-of-a-kind. Then use the findings to create richer and more meaningful environments and experiences.



A cultural show at Incheon International Airport.

3. Find partners that enhance the airport experience

While quality of customer experience is critical to the success of an airport, the ‘partner experience’ will be a growing priority in years to come as well. In fact, as the industry grows more competitive, improving B2C relationships will not be enough in order to leverage an airport’s full potential.

This means it is not only the traveller experience that counts – the B2B experience becomes more important as airports begin to expand their business model. As a result, relationship building and the selection of partners is now a fundamental tactic for airports to stay attractive and grow.

Having a strong brand attracts travellers, which means it also attracts airlines, retailers, hotels and other partners – and helps airports build and sustain those relationships.

4. Leverage your local DNA and cultural heritage

Airports are crucial for tourism and nation branding in that they are the first places people see when they enter another country. Airports, for better or worse, create an immediate impression of a region and culture in the minds of visitors.

What does your airport say about your city or country? Do you have the work of local artists and artisans integrated into the environment? Do you serve authentic cuisine and beverages from your region? Is the airport hospitable and welcoming?

Culture is a point of difference. Bear in mind that it’s the consumer’s associations with the attributes of a particular region that make them want to visit in the first place.

Increasingly, customers expect a greater variety of choices, higher quality food and merchandise, exceptional service, and really want to have a unique, cultural experience with more entertainment options when they’re travelling. How can you meet – or exceed – their expectations?

5. Be a good corporate citizen

Airports occupy significant real estate and are at the centre of local and global discussions around emissions, resources and noise control. Being a good corporate citizen and integrating sustainability into airport construction, design, and operations is quickly becoming a smart way to guarantee the long-term future of airports, achieve cost-savings, and differentiate your brand.

Whether optimising the operations of the airfield, boosting energy efficiency, reducing carbon emissions, cutting water consumption, building LEED certified facilities or eliminating waste to landfill through recycling and composting, there is a lot airports can do to reduce their environmental impact and become better neighbours.

It’s no longer enough to set targets. Customers are increasingly concerned about their own carbon footprints – and they want to know what you’re doing about yours.

Becoming a hub of choice today means minimising environmental impacts, maximising the passenger experience, and building credibility as a sustainable, socially responsible brand that cares about people and the planet.

Brand-building pays off—but it’s a long-term investment

All of these elements – customer experience, storytelling, cultural authenticity and environmental stewardship – either build or diminish the value of an airport brand.

Another critical factor is employee engagement, as an airport’s employees can become its most valuable customer educators and brand ambassadors.

Therefore, airports must make sure that management and employees understand the brand and how the brand is expressed. This way, travellers can have a consistently positive, memorable experience in the city or country they’re visiting – beginning with your airport.

Developing and managing a brand is a long-term process that requires commitment, effort, and attention. But, for those willing to make the investment, the returns can be enormous. Besides the creation of a distinct image, a strong brand can help airports maximise the impact of communications, marketing and sales.

But, most importantly, a well-managed brand actually boosts business performance, helps reduce risk, and delivers a higher economic value. To reach new heights commercially and financially, today’s airports must learn how to unlock the full potential of their brands.

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