Diversity at Its Best
Learning to Accommodate the Never-Typical Traveler

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Diversity enhances the great airport experience. Diversity among airline passengers, airport tenants, and airline and airport personnel drives the planning and design decisions that have long-term implications for every airport facility. But diversity can create challenges, so airports must plan to accommodate these differences.

There is no longer a typical traveler. The demographic mix among airline passengers is changing dramatically. From the aging Baby Boomers to Gen Y, the airport experience has to meet broad expectations and desires.

The Generation Breakdown
Essentially, four generations must be considered when planning and designing terminals. These generations are quite diverse, as outlined by author, speaker and entrepreneur Jason Ryan Dorsey, known as “The Gen Y Guy.”

- **Mature**: Born before 1946, these travelers are more conservative. They are often described as focused on delayed gratification and are sometimes considered inflexible. Their formative experiences were born out of the Great Depression, and they often are less technologically savvy.
- **Boomers**: Often marked by competitive and driven personalities, these consumers were born between 1946 and 1964. They often focus on ethics and are the fastest-retiring demographic. Their formative events include the civil rights movement, the Cold War and the space race. Typically, they possess some tech savvy.
- **Generation X**: Born between 1965 and 1976, these airport passengers are typically described as skeptical, confident and innovative. Some would say they are driven by a sense of entitlement. Their defining events include the Vietnam War and the technology boom. They are fairly savvy about technology.
- **Gen Y**: This quickly growing demographic group, born between 1977 and 1995, is described as thriving on instant gratification. They are often focused on lifestyles and relationships, but they place a high value on philanthropy. Gen Y has been influenced by events including 9/11 and the growth of the Internet, and as a result, they are typically heavy technology users.

Tech Effect
Technology, with its increasingly more significant impact on our daily lives, is a key planning and design consideration for airports. Technology is now integrated into every aspect of airport operations: parking, curbside luggage check-in, ticket counters, security checkpoints, concessions, baggage handling, airport management and aircraft ramp operations.

The effects go beyond the traveling public. Concession workers, airport operations staff, baggage handlers, security personnel, airport police, airline pilots — everyone who works at the airport — also feel the impact. The full range of generational differences described here are found among both travelers and those who work at the airport. Each group uses and embraces technology differently.

For example, passenger processing at the ticket counter has evolved and continues to do so. Airlines change and adapt how passengers are processed. Airports integrate common-use systems differently now than they did in the past. Ticket counter systems range from a traditional, staffed position — which tends to appeal to Mature and Boomer passengers — to the minimally staffed kiosk layouts that work well for Generation X. Gen Y likes the cool, trendy layout used by Virgin America, reminiscent of Apple stores.

Security and Wayfinding
Security is a complicated issue in the context of interacting with the public. Passenger screening personnel deal with diverse demographics every day, so it is important for them to understand generational differences, so they can perform their jobs in an appropriate manner. For instance, when delayed through a screening checkpoint, Gen Y typically is more flexible, while the Mature and Boomer groups may react with less flexibility — a reason why efficient use of technology to expedite safe screening is critical.

Each generation interprets wayfinding and effective communication within airport terminals differently. Traditional signage and accommodations for hearing and sight impairments may appeal more to the Mature and Boomer groups. For Generation X and Gen Y, technology is a driver for communication. Generation X may like more of a MapQuest approach with visual media in the terminal, while Gen Yers may prefer to navigate via an interactive, GPS-enabled airport map application for their mobile devices. And these forms of communication should be available in languages other than English.

The demographic mix among airline passengers is changing dramatically and so are their expectations and desires.
Ethnic Factors
The changing ethnic demographic is also a consideration when planning for the great airport experience as the U.S. population becomes more multicultural. The Hispanic population now spans the nation, while the Asian demographic rises. International airport gateways have incorporated multicultural demographics through language and technology, but more airports everywhere need to consider these demographics in order to successfully facilitate a positive passenger experience.

The key is to be flexible and adapt to these evolving generational and ethnic differences. After all, what’s next? Airports and airlines must plan now for the children of Gen Y and their expectations of the great airport experience.