

# Designing the Destination

Customer-first developments are transforming airports into curated experiences for the discerning traveler, as hyper-local marketing campaigns prove that the destination itself is the brand story.

BY NICK VIVION

**W**ith Samsung's recent splash surrounding the branded takeover of an entire terminal at Heathrow, airport marketing has finally come of age. Brands realize the unprecedented cultural reach offered by airports, and airport managers are eager to boost the profit-driving revenues of food, beverage and retail by focusing less on the sanitization of experiences and more on the uniqueness of the place.

Most importantly, passengers are demanding more. From art installations to local products, it's no longer enough to have a generic gift shop and fast-food court seeded by familiar brands. Travelers expect a true experience that reflects the airport's location. In the increasingly globalized competitive environment for airport selection, airports must step up and meet these expectations through technology, choice and customer service. >



PHOTO: JCDECAUX AIRPORT



See our feature story on airport lounges

> PAGE 56



## SAMSUNG SPLASHES OUT WITH HEATHROW TAKEOVER

The latest example of branded spaces in airports is by far the boldest brand move in airport history – and definitely the riskiest.

Samsung paid out handsomely – of course, the terms weren't disclosed – to take over the busiest terminal in the world, Heathrow's Terminal 5, and rename it "Terminal Samsung Galaxy S5." The branded takeover includes every single digital sign in the terminal, in addition to ranks of hands-on Galaxy handsets at the terminal's Dixon Travel store.

Samsung UK and Ireland vice-president of corporate marketing Russell Taylor told the press that Samsung is "always looking for ways to maximize brand impact and this activity [is] a one-off opportunity to push the boundaries like no other brand has been allowed to do before."

Certainly, the boundary pushing has made waves across all trade, tech and mainstream press, providing a PR boost beyond the in-airport activation. The sheer amount of media was likely worth whatever the no-doubt exorbitant fee was, as this sort of mainstream buzz is incredibly difficult to manufacture.

The true value as far as branded spaces in airports are concerned is much more tenuous. Will Samsung sell more handsets as a result? Will the international nature of the terminal provide a larger marketing ROI, as the messaging reaches more cultures at once? Or will travelers be weary of a branded assault on their senses as they pass through Terminal 5 and be imprinted with negative sentiment for the brand?

These questions remain unanswered but highlight the inherent marketing advantages of placing a product or brand within the multicultural context of an airport. The global consumer base walking past each store is wholly unique to airports, and near impossible to replicate anywhere else. More brands are catching onto this heretofore undervalued "captive audience" in a mobile consumer culture, with many eagerly watching the results of Samsung's risky experiment.

## BRANDED FOOD AND BEVERAGE DEFINES DESTINATIONS

Even as an international audience creates a globalized demographic mash-up, travelers are increasingly hungry for expanded food

and beverage (F&B) options in transit. This desire for culinary diversity has collided with the increased interest in hyper-local foods to create a new push towards airport offerings that provide a sense of place to travelers.

In fact, even on-the-pulse food-media outlets like Eater curate airport dining guides that highlight the local editor's preferences for where to eat in the local airport.

This trend extends from Austin to Singapore, as airports create specific-to-destination F&B. Austin focuses on Tex-Mex with Nuevo Leon and BBQ with Salt Lick, while Ray Benson's Roadhouse goes one step further, offering not only local food but also live music to create a fully immersive experience reflective of the airport's location.

Another stellar example of in-airport destination experiences comes from the Munich Airport, where they not only have an on-premise Biergarten called Airbräu, but also an enormous central courtyard that variously plays host to ice-skating, Bavarian curling, live musical entertainment and a Winter Market – all of which create an "only in München" experience, which begins right at the airport. >



LEFT and ABOVE: The Perfectionists' Café in London Heathrow Terminal 2: Where you can get fantastic food... fast.

ABOVE RIGHT: Interior designer Afroditi Krassa was inspired by The Perfectionists' Café menu of signature British dishes, and also iconic film and TV references such as *Catch Me if You Can* and *Mad Men*.

The unique global consumer base walking through airports is nearly impossible to replicate.



The Airbräu at Munich Airport is the only airport brewery in the world and is well-known for its craft beer offerings. It also serves Bavarian treats and features live entertainment.



PHOTOS: AFRODITI KRASSA STUDIO; AIRBRÄU



The Centurion Lounge by American Express is marketed as “your destination between destinations,” offering complimentary and locally-inspired food, wine and drinks to members.

Airport F&B is also extending into the high-design space, competing not only with other airport restaurants but also with in-city restaurants to become a destination in its own right. Case in point: chef Heston Blumenthal’s Perfectionists’ Café, also in Heathrow (Terminal 2), which has been designed to reflect some of the heyday of air travel through a vintage 1960s style. Designed by Afroditia Krassa Studio, the handsome space of marble, dark timber, brass and leather also includes two claims to “airport firsts:” liquid-nitrogen ice cream and an open-plan wood-fired oven.

Another example of the destination-influenced culinary selection comes from San Francisco International Airport (SFO), where nearly 100 percent of the F&B outlets

are somehow connected with the region, whether based there or originated nearby as independent operators, and the offerings reflect the culinary tastemaking that the Bay Area is known for. From the Burger Joint to the Dogpatch Bakehouse and Caffè to Fung Lum, eating at SFO is much like eating out in the nearby area.

The takeaway here is that airports are now walled-off cities with a guaranteed customer base, protected from the vagaries and whims of distracted urbanites. Yet these outlets face an increasingly discerning air traveler who expects attractive design, quality food and appropriately priced offerings more reflective of a competitive city. In fact, the airport’s location is essential in defining the brand, as the destination is the brand in travel.

### IBEAONS TO BRING NEW MEANING TO “BRANDED SPACES”

The reality of airport retail is challenged by the fact that the foot traffic is often hustling from one gate to another, without much time to stop and shop.

The promise of new technologies, such as the small iBeacons that connect passengers to digital information specific to that beacon’s location, is that they can extend the airport experience beyond the in-person, in-transit experience.

Passengers now become targets for more interaction, both in the moment and in the future, which allows for enhancement and investment in the airport retail environment. Similar to the Samsung example, brands can use airports to plant branded seeds in the minds of a globally mobile consumer.

There are plenty of other top merchandising concepts being rolled out worldwide, showing that the competition is truly fierce on a vast scale. As savvy travelers begin to choose transit airports according to amenities, it is especially important that airports move away from the “fish in a barrel” mentality to attacking the realities of a global competitive marketplace.

The emerging technology is soon to be deployed in airports around the world, with technologists at SITA Lab testing the beacons’ application in the real world. The company has also created a registry that allows beacons deployed from different retailers to be tracked all together – particularly in a bid to ensure no disruption to existing communication channels.

### THE CENTURION LOUNGE BY AMERICAN EXPRESS

An exclusive lounge is perhaps the ultimate in branded space, as offering a wholly original experience is much easier when controlling all variables. American Express has nailed its demographic with the series of exclusive lounges popping up in airports across the US.

The highly differentiated lounge brand includes gourmet food and drinks from local chefs, Internet access and a refreshingly modern aesthetic that truly creates an oasis amid the chaos. It might actually re-inject romance and luxury into the travel experience.

Exactly on-message for American Express, each lounge reinforces the company’s carefully tailored brand positioning – even to those who are only walking past. By leveraging a global brand within the multinational stream of an airport environment, the company will develop many high-value fliers into ever-more fierce and loyal customers.

It could be that these customer-first developments are finally ushering in the true golden age of travel – shattering the anonymous sameness of tepid travel that defined the past two decades, and building a casually engaging, site-specific and wholly captivating new world order for airport transit. ■