

The new ‘sanitized’ air travel customer journey: possibilities for a post-COVID-19 world

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A new ‘sanitized’ passenger journey awaits travelers around the globe. The current crisis spurs airlines and airports alike to come up with innovative health precautions to make the customer journey as enjoyable as possible while all measures are well in place. It will take some time getting used to the new standards, but the entire industry is strong-willed to re-instate passengers’ confidence and make them return to the skies as quickly as possible.

What changes do passengers have to expect along their journey?

Analyzing a high-level customer journey (see figure 1), it becomes clear that many touchpoints will either be altered or altogether differ even after the crisis. While some changes are obvious and might have already been implemented by airlines – e.g. wearing face masks throughout the flight (Lufthansa, KLM and many others), strict cabin cleaning and sanitization before every flight (United Airlines) or during non-operating hours (Ryanair) – others might be more surprising.



Figure 1: High-level 10-step customer journey, Source: Lufthansa Consulting

Let’s have a look on the booking phase and the physical part of the journey where sanitization measures can be carried out (steps 1 – 8), while leaving out aftersales services and loyalty as these steps are not part of the physical journey. Here is what we at Lufthansa Consulting believe the future post-COVID-19 customer experience will look like, if airlines and airports succeed in balancing customer experience with the new caution measures:

1. At home

During booking, customers will be provided with all relevant health related information and asked to submit health data if required by the authorities. In some cases, even the provision of health checks might become an obligation certifying a passenger’s immunity to the virus or at least their health condition.

2. & 8. Transport to/from airport

Most likely, airlines will cut some ultra-short haul feeder flights in order to reduce passengers’ time in an enclosed environment. However, it can be expected that airlines will do everything to ease their passengers’ way to the airport with forward thinking traffic and transport notifications, way finding and real-time congestion avoidance information.



3. At departure airport

Travelers will spend a little more time at airports with all measures in place. However, if farewells will have to take place outside the airport building granting access only to staff and traveling passengers, airports have to re-define how to grant a positive passenger experience. Besides the obligation to wear face masks at all times while in the airport (e.g. MUC), travelers will have to get used to health-checks, disinfection tunnels for luggage, and regularly washing their hands. Passengers will be guided through the buildings as smoothly as possible while keeping a distance while queuing and being guided by floor markings, ‘traffic lights’ or even more sophisticated guidance systems.

Check-in desks will be fitted with plexiglass barriers (e.g. Delta) and self-service kiosks will increasingly use face recognition features reducing interaction to an almost touchless experience (e.g. Etihad).

All retail outlets as well as cafés and restaurants will have to adhere to stricter health measures, shifting innovative solutions such as ‘delivery at gate’. Finally, frequent sanitization of all airport areas will be of utmost importance in the future. Some airports already experiment with futuristic sanitization robots today (e.g. AUH).

4. Boarding and departure

Few of the amenities appreciated by 1st and business class passengers will be suspended for the time being, i.e. limousine- (Emirates), most lounge- (Lufthansa) and non-health related special services.

For boarding, passengers might undergo quick blood tests (DXB). As long as schedules won’t return to full capacity, no two adjacent gates should be open at the same time to make more space available. Additional busses will be deployed to bring passengers safely to remotely parked aircraft. Floor markings at the gate, in the busses and on jet bridges will show passengers how to distance. Some airlines and airports might even promote open air walkways to the aircraft to avoid congestion on jet bridges. Finally, passport and boarding pass control will be conducted in a touchless manner.

Any passengers exhibiting symptoms associated to COVID-19 might be rejected entry to the aircraft or gate itself, which, if managed professionally, serves as an important step in a safe journey.

5. In-flight

Leaving the middle seat empty to allow for distancing inside the cabin is currently controversially discussed also by IATA both in terms of operational feasibility and medical necessity¹. To support a secure journey also in crowded airplanes, however, airlines require passengers and crew to wear face masks during the flight, crew might be wearing gloves in addition (Qatar, Vistara, others). Additionally, sanitizer dispensers will be available throughout the cabin. Some airlines might provide sanitization wipes for passengers in addition to cleaning the surface areas of seats and tray tables as a self-reassuring measure.

Passengers might have to fly without blankets, re-usable headphones and amenity kits. Cabin magazines will be provided only digitally, preferably through apps passengers can download to their own devices. There is a clear trend that inflight entertainment and food menus might also be only provided through bring your own device (BYOD) channels.

¹ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2020-05-05-01/>

As for the beloved on-board service, only packaged food and bottled or canned drinks will be provided to passengers taking out the personal touch in presenting food and beverage but reducing the risk of infection (Emirates). Purchasable items will only be available through cashless payments (Ryanair) and any other amenity services such as offering hot towels, snacks and duty-free products will be either suspended or carried out as on-demand services.

The use of lavatories will be regulated by crew (Ryanair) or restricted completely on short-haul flights. Crew will also be responsible for sanitizing the bathrooms regularly on long-haul flights.

In case a passenger exhibits COVID-19 symptoms in-flight, airlines might even provide demarcated rows in the back of the cabin as isolation zones.

6. Disembarkation & arrival

Upon arrival, disembarkation should be conducted in smaller tranches to facilitate distanced queuing supported by floor markings in all relevant areas. At more and more destinations, immigration forms should be filled out denoting passengers' health condition. Immigration is best carried out in a touchless manner if possible, e.g. through the use of face recognition instead of providing finger prints and passport scans. Quick health checks on arrival might become a popular stop, where airports offer this voluntary service smoothly and effortlessly (VIE).

7. At destination airport

Baggage claims, 'lost & found' and transfer desk services will be structured according to distancing restrictions or even solely offered through digital self-service claim handling, while floor markings and 'traffic lights' will guide passengers the exit.

What are the drivers in the short-term and in the long-term?

With most airlines working on resuming their schedules, all of the above measures will already be necessary in the short-term when re-starting, re-scaling and re-stabilizing the business will be the most pressing issue. As air travel slowly resumes to its pre-COVID-19 levels, airlines and airports alike will face the challenge to sustain health measures while re-establishing a service-level that passengers have grown accustomed to in the past. Hence, the airline industry's innate competitive environment will propel after the crisis as passengers will not only choose airlines upon price and convenience but also according to perceived safety in terms of anti-COVID-19 measures.

Can the crisis be a catalyzer for digitalization along the customer journey?

In the wake of the crisis, 'social distancing' and the avoidance of touch-based services assign a new importance to digital services where airlines and airports can exceed passengers' expectations. Through innovate products, a truly personalized passenger centric approach to travelling will play a key role to boosting satisfaction and customer loyalty. This challenging crisis could indeed be a chance for airlines and airports to jumpstart their digital offerings at each and every touch point.

To learn more and discuss how your organization could benefit from Lufthansa Consulting's expertise on Crisis Recovery, please get in touch at ALcrisis-solutions@LHConsulting.com.

Together, we can make it through to better days.



Infographics

Taking the 'sanitized' journey

Air travel in a post-COVID-19 world: overview of main touchpoints

