

# Speaking clearly



Joe LoGiudice,  
"the voice" of Boston Logan  
International Airport.

How do airports communicate with their passengers? Chris Kjelgaard investigates.

**C**ommunicating with passengers effectively and in a timely fashion has become extremely important for airports, and the gateways that excel at 'talking' traditionally doing well in ACI's ASQ customer satisfaction survey.

As passenger numbers grow, security requirements tighten and revenue opportunities multiply, airport operators face complex problems in keeping their businesses efficient, safe and profitable and, in such an operating environment, the ability to communicate quickly and effectively with the public is vital.

Today's airports need to 'talk' to passengers on a variety of important subjects ranging from flight schedules and wayfinding to security screening, transportation and parking and they are doing it in many different ways – some traditional, some a little different and some that wouldn't have seemed possible 20 years ago.

Possibly the most traditional way of all for airports to communicate with their passengers in the terminal building is the public address system, and it is still used today of course, though the 21st century gateway likes to keep announcements down to the minimum to reduce passenger confusion.

As part of its 'silence airport' concept, Copenhagen's passenger service personnel only make PA announcements if a gate is changed or a flight is close to departure time and the final passengers have failed to arrive at the gate.

But airports must still communicate information to passengers clearly and at the right time for it to have maximum impact, claims BAA's retail marketing director, Sarah Jezard, who points out that the company's passenger communications strategy hinges on three key points. She says: "Right message, right place, right time; anticipated, relevant and personal communication; and assisting the passenger in planning their journey up to 72 hours before their flight."

BAA's passenger communications are based on two principles. "Firstly, we talk to the passengers through multiple formats when they are at their most receptive, and secondly we blend information with inspiration and – in the current climate – reassurance," says Jezard. "Much of our approach is about encouraging the passenger to think ahead."

Not coincidentally, as the need to communicate with passengers has grown, so has the imagination and technological innovation that airports employ in getting their messages across.

Auckland International Airport, for example, claims to be "really grabbing hold of technology" as it looks at new ways of communicating with its passengers. The New Zealand gateway's head of IT and telecommunications, Tony Wickstead, believes that its "myriad of initiatives" underway will stand it in good stead in the future.

The internet has certainly become a vital tool for many airports. Baltimore

Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport's (BWI) website not only features frequently updated information on flight schedules – by now a standard feature on most major airports' sites – but also details the ground transportation options. Its site provides maps of each level of the terminal and the airport's car parks, gives passengers security screening preparation advice, lists gates for flight connections and offers extensive information on nearby cities. It also highlights the airport's Youth Art Gallery.

Frankfurt Airport's website goes even further. Not only does it provide a virtual tour of the airport and slide shows of airport scenes, but it allows passengers to book flights, hotels, airport parking and rental cars. Frankfurt's site provides advice and information for people meeting passengers and highlights landside retail, dining and duty free shopping opportunities.

So does Amsterdam Schiphol's website, which features news items for passengers about new retail and service opportunities – including, in late January, an announcement about its new 'Schiphol Weddings' service for couples seeking ideas for a dream wedding.

Schiphol's site lists child play areas and airline lounges and provides information about vaccinations. It highlights the two fee-based communications centres Schiphol provides for passengers and – like Frankfurt – offers hotel booking services. Though flight booking isn't yet an

Leonardo DiCaprio is the latest famous face to be featured on the cover of MWAA's Washington Flyer Magazine.

option, the site does let passengers order foreign currency and travellers cheques in advance.

BWI and Amsterdam provide extensive information about airport access for passengers with disabilities. But none of the three airports provide public interest links to live webcam coverage of airside operations – unlike Copenhagen.

As internet technology develops, a new trend is becoming evident on airport websites. They are increasingly using video – showing real people and real locations or using computer-generated imagery (CGI) – to help passengers research wayfinding, parking, security requirements and ground transportation in advance, as well as airport retail, dining and services.

Leading the way in adopting new website video technology are Portland, Boston Logan and Montréal-Trudeau. These airports were the first customers for Airport Wayfinder; the ACI backed, computer-generated videos produced by California-based Air Travel Video Technologies (ATV) to help passengers familiarise themselves in advance with airport orientation and services.

Founder and president, Nancy Grimes says: "Wayfinding is a very complex issue for people. Understanding maps is different for different people – but people, cross-culturally, understand a picture. Situational awareness is what we're providing the traveller."

The other benefit of Airport Wayfinder is it offers airports a revenue-generating opportunity, notes Grimes. Portland, for example, wanted its video to highlight the airport-owned long-term parking options in order to allow them to compete more effectively with a privately owned competitor. Montréal is planning to upgrade its one to identify the retail and dining options in different areas of the airport, and Boston Logan has expressed an interest in having context-related banner advertising around the edges of its video after discovering that 20,000 people viewed it within a month of it being launched.

Grimes believes that in the not too distant future, Airport Wayfinder videos will be available at interactive kiosks in airport terminals, as she feels that they are the logical successor to static map displays for passengers.

It may never be as popular as the BBC World Service, but Boston Logan's new radio station is possibly the most unique way an airport has devised to



date for communicating with its passengers. Launched in December by airport operator, the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), Logan Radio is a virtual radio station offering a studio-produced combination of contemporary music and professionally narrated public service announcements and revenue-generating advertisements.

Massport will receive 60% of Logan Radio's revenue and this could produce several hundred thousand dollars of additional income annually.

Offering FM-radio clarity, Logan Radio has replaced the background Muzak and TSA produced announcements previously piped through the Logan terminals' PA systems. Pyramid Radio (which is producing the audio content) and its business partners have invested over \$100,000 in upgrading the airport's PA systems to high-fidelity standards.

"With Logan Radio, we really want to deliver a customised message to our customers in a format they're familiar with," says Massport's director of aviation,

Edward Freni. "It's just a good, consistent way to communicate and the feedback we've had so far has been very positive."

UK airport operator, BAA, also employs website video and radio-based audio to communicate with its passengers – but very differently from Boston. Using what it calls a smart, lifestyle-focused content strategy, BAA has created filmed content for its website that rather than being based on standard corporate style, has been based on short TV programmes, says Jezard.

It has produced two different kinds of TV programmes. One, a series of three films fronted by UK style and design gurus Colin McAllister and Justin Ryan, focused on uncovering the retail delights and surprises at BAA airports. The second, a standalone film hosted by veteran newsreader Martyn Lewis, focused on landside security changes at BAA airports but also emphasised how the airports' retail opportunities haven't changed.

BAA has also worked with service provider, Cabvision, to create a bespoke

UK airport operator, BAA, now communicates with London taxi cab passengers.



BAA channel in London taxicabs. The channel shows the security and lifestyle films on screens fitted in 1,000 taxis, reaching an estimated 100,000 customers a month. Additionally, BAA used Lewis for a series of 60-second radio infomercials it aired on various UK stations to discuss the European Union's security rule changes in August 2006.

Three other telecoms technologies have become important as airports seek to take passenger communications to the next level. One, adopted successfully by Copenhagen, is using plasma screens at strategic locations such as baggage carousels and check-in halls to give passengers information on expected wait times for hold baggage and security screening lines.

Susanne Frank, director and head of passenger relations at Copenhagen Airport, says that the installation of 15-minute baggage delivery countdown screens in the baggage reclaim area has led to a significant increase in passenger satisfaction levels – despite it sometimes taking longer than that for luggage to arrive on the carousel. If baggage delivery is delayed for any reason, the airport can use the screen system's dynamic text manager to script messages to keep passengers informed about the situation.

Similarly, when the European Union (EU) introduced new security rules at short notice last August, Copenhagen installed 10 large screens in two check-in

halls to let passengers know expected security queuing times. The screens also helped airport staff distribute the screening load equitably between different security checkpoints. "If staff saw the wait was much longer at one hall's checkpoints than the other's, they redirected passengers to the shorter lines, cutting waiting times," says Frank.

Auckland – which uses airside screens to give its passengers updated gate information and to let them know roughly how long it will take to walk to their departure gates – is also adopting technology that allows passengers to view the airport's flight information display system (FIDS) via their mobile phone. Initially, passengers will have to take the initiative to view the information but the airport envisages that it will provide automated updates in the future.

Most airports that have adopted phone-texting FIDS update systems, including Auckland and Sydney, charge small fees for the service. BAA and Dubai already offer query-based single-message and automated multiple-message phone texting services. Again, these services are fee-based, but Copenhagen's FIDS-texting service is free.

Airports are now using email for a variety of passenger communications. Some, such as Boston Logan, use them to provide passengers with flight status updates derived from its FIDS. BAA offers passengers a range of email services, including airport-specific newsletters,

shopping-related messages and notification of security changes.

It also sends personalised emails to the 100,000 active members of BAA's WorldPoints shopping loyalty scheme, aiming to make their content as interesting and as relevant to the individual member as possible, says Jezard. It seems to work. "Results have shown open and click-through rates as high as 35.5% and 12.4% respectively, way above the UK benchmark for the retail sector," she reveals. "Members for whom we have an email address spend 126% more than members who have not yet provided one."

However, traditional methods of communicating with passengers still work well. Many airports publish magazines or newspapers to keep passengers informed of new on-site services, the status of airport construction and development work, and tenant airlines' flight schedule changes and new destinations.

Possibly the best read and longest established airport magazine is the Washington Flyer, the glossy monthly publication of Washington's Dulles and Reagan National airports. Targeted at arriving passengers and providing information on Washington DC and its airports, its popularity is such that 17 years after being launched by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), all 130,000 copies are snapped up each month.

MWAA and Copenhagen Airports strongly believe in the personal touch. Both hire teams of students in the peak summer season and holiday periods to serve as airport ambassadors. These ambassadors – Copenhagen's team wearing green shirts and the MWAA's two teams wearing yellow – answer passengers' questions, provide directions and help speed up check-in and security screening waiting lines.

Dubai International Airport goes even further by offering individual escort and VIP check-in and lounge services. While these services are fee-based, the aim of making passengers' airport experiences easier and more enjoyable is the same.

"The main task for us is to make it as hassle-free for passengers as possible, especially these days, when new security rules make it all the more difficult for them," remarks Frank. "It's quite a challenge." AV