



Elevating Passenger Experience in the Next Era of Onboard Hospitality 2026



World Travel Catering®
& Onboard Services

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Thank you to our ambassadors for providing insights to this report



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Introduction

The commercial skies have changed. Airlines now face new passenger-driven benchmarks in order to maintain loyalty and maximise revenue. Sustainability, personalisation, wellness, and technological innovation are no longer aspirational buzzwords. Instead, these are the defining factors in loyalty and long-term profitability for airlines. This report brings together the expertise of WTCE's ambassadors who are leaders in sustainability, special diets, travel nutrition, beverages and onboard retail to provide airline buyers with actionable insights into what's next for the passenger experience.

Built on the shared vision of enhancing satisfaction and loyalty while achieving measurable returns, this report draws a clear link between the challenges airlines face today and the solutions that will be showcased at WTCE 2026.



A New Horizon for Onboard Hospitality

The cabin has long been a space where operational complexity and passenger emotion collide. It is no longer just the means of getting from A to B. It is the final, tangible expression of an airline's brand – and the aesthetic arena where modern travellers are judging most critically. As global passenger numbers are set to double by 2050, the industry faces mounting pressure to deliver meaningful change across three dimensions: sustainability, inclusivity and digital transformation.

The following insights, gathered from our ambassadors, reveal how airlines can seize this moment to reimagine the onboard experience – not only as a service but as a strategic differentiator.





Sustainability Takes Flight

Few issues are as urgent – or as commercially significant – as sustainability. Matt Crane, WTCE Sustainability Ambassador and Founder of the Aviation Sustainability Forum (ASF), captures the tension facing the industry: “All suppliers are under pressure by airlines, caterers and passengers to remove unnecessary plastics,” he explains. “Plastic replacements are increasing, but many remain in their infancy.”

While the transition to sustainable materials is essential, Crane warns that it is only one piece of a much larger puzzle. Airlines, he argues, must look beyond packaging to drive innovation in supply-chain design. The current model, “Take, Make, Waste” is fundamentally linear. True progress requires circularity – systems that track, recover and reuse materials rather than incinerate them or pass on the problem.

However, achieving that circularity is far from simple. Existing waste management structures are fragmented by strict international catering waste regulations that often require contaminated food and dairy items to be incinerated, even on short-haul routes. Moreover, without accurate data linking galley load to actual consumption, airlines struggle to quantify waste and measure savings.

Crane points to a promising shift that was already visible at WTCE 2025, where AI-driven computer vision technologies were exhibited for the first time. These systems analyse catering waste from inbound flights, providing granular insights that can inform smarter provisioning decisions. “Case studies are building,” he says, “and airlines would be wise to evaluate the options being exhibited at WTCE 2026.”

Such technology not only supports waste reduction but also offers a compelling ROI story: less over-catering means lower cost and lower emissions. And yet, sustainability must also connect emotionally with passengers. Carbon models – already in use across other sectors – can help airlines communicate environmental impact transparently. It is this transparency which is often lacking. Imagine a digital menu where passengers can see the carbon footprint of each meal choice, creating a subtle nudge towards more sustainable options while reinforcing brand credibility.

Crane’s message is clear: the future of cabin sustainability depends on collective leadership. Airlines must collaborate across the industry, advocate for risk-based regulatory reform, and adopt shared waste-management infrastructures. “Passenger numbers are set to double,” he reminds us. “Untouched food waste already costs airlines over \$2 billion every year. We need visionary leaders who will work with suppliers to capture those savings – and passengers will love that story.”



Matt Crane

WTCE Sustainability Ambassador
and Founder of the Aviation
Sustainability Forum (ASF)

Inclusivity in the Sky

While sustainability may dominate environmental agendas, inclusivity defines the human side of transformation. Julianne Ponan MBE, WTCE Special Diets Ambassador and CEO and Founder of Creative Nature, has long championed the rights of allergy-aware travellers. For her, technology holds the key to a future where passengers with dietary restrictions can fly confidently, safely, and without stigma.

"New tech should remove friction and replace informal notes with verified data that travels with the passenger," Ponan explains. She envisions a unified passenger allergy profile stored securely within an airline's system and shared seamlessly across booking platforms, caterers and crew tablets. This would mean that a traveller only needs to input their allergies once, offering an elegant solution to a problem that currently causes frustration and fear.

Beyond profiles, machine-readable allergy codes could automate menu matching and kitchen alerts. QR-based verification, similar to the GS1 UK pilot programme, would link every onboard meal to a batch ID and full allergen declaration, enabling passengers and crew to double-check accuracy in real time. Combined with push notifications and digital audit trails, this system would replace the unreliable paper allergen lists that are still used on many flights.

But inclusivity isn't just about compliance – it's about care. Ponan's vision of personalised reassurance includes sealed allergen-free meals, pre-cleaned seating options, and even buffer seating zones for high-risk passengers. She highlights the emotional power of small gestures: having pre-packaged 'backup' items ensures that a passenger never goes without a meal, transforming anxiety into appreciation.

Operationally, the challenge is complex. Multiple suppliers, inconsistent labelling laws, limited galley space and fragmented IT systems create an environment where

no communication or miscommunication is easy. Yet, Ponan insists, the payoff is worth it. By investing in digital trust layers, verified allergy profiles and visible certification marks – such as her own Top 14 Allergen Free seal – airlines can win the loyalty of an underserved demographic.

"Partner with recognised allergen-focused brands," she advises, "and work end-to-end on solutions. These investments deliver lower complaint rates, higher retention and a reputational uplift that drives real commercial benefit." Inclusivity then becomes a competitive advantage, and not just an operational necessity.



Julianne Ponan MBE

WTCE Special Diets Ambassador
and CEO and Founder of
Creative Nature

Nutrition as Strategy

As traveller expectations evolve, food is emerging as a strategic lever for wellbeing and loyalty. Melissa Adamski, WTCE Travel Nutrition Ambassador and Director of Nutterd Out Nutrition, argues that we are entering a new era of nutritional awareness where passengers expect more than convenience.

"Airlines are in a unique position to influence how people feel during and after travel," she notes. With global attention turning to health and performance, especially among younger travellers, a sophisticated nutrition programme can become a differentiator. But it's not enough just to serve a "healthy meal". Airlines must understand what healthy means across cultures and develop clear frameworks that guide menu design, sourcing and presentation.

Operationally, fresh and locally sourced ingredients introduce complexity. Varying definitions of health, supply-chain inconsistencies and shelf-life challenges. Adamski recommends a nutrition framework that balances quality, cost and logistics – ensuring consistency while allowing for regional adaptation. Ultra-processed foods may remain a reality, but with smart design, even these can be improved for nutritional value.

Transparency is equally critical. "A lot of the time we don't know what's in our food when it's served," she says. "Airlines can build trust by communicating openly – posting menus online, describing meals more like a restaurant and giving passengers more autonomy to choose." Digital pre-ordering systems, which are already gaining traction, provide an ideal channel for this transparency.

Beyond the plate, nutrition can also help address common travel stressors such as jet lag, dehydration and fatigue. Adamski points to emerging research on circadian nutrition and timing of food intake. Simple interventions, like educating passengers through inflight entertainment or lounge materials, can enhance comfort and performance.

"Nutrition shouldn't be an afterthought," she insists. "It needs to be woven into the airline's values and business strategy." By embedding nutrition frameworks across suppliers, caterers and service concepts, airlines can scale wellbeing across all classes. The outcome: passengers who not only feel better but associate that feeling with the brand itself.



Melissa Adamski

WTCE Travel Nutrition Ambassador and
Director of Nutterd Out Nutrition

The New Art of Beverage Curation



For Kelly Stevenson, WTCE Beverages Ambassador and Director of JetVine, drinks are more than a refreshment – they can be storytelling tools. “True personalisation in the onboard beverage experience isn’t just about making the menu bigger,” she says. “It’s about making the moment of choice feel more personal.” For business travellers, that might mean a pre-selected drink preference saved in their frequent-flyer profile, or the ability to pre-order through the airline app – a seamless touchpoint that speaks to efficiency and status. Leisure travellers often respond to discovery – whether that’s limited-edition cocktails, destination-inspired drinks or curated tasting flights such as a “Gin Journey” or “Bin End Wine Collection.”

Technology can support this at scale – think AI-assisted recommendations or digital menus that tell the story behind each signature serve. But Stevenson stresses that the human element remains central. “Cabin crew who can connect a customer’s journey with a thoughtful suggestion elevate the experience from transactional to truly memorable.”

Balancing tradition and innovation is the next challenge. “Curation, not excess, is the key,” Stevenson explains. “A well-designed beverage list tells a story that balances heritage with innovation: the established classics that reassure, alongside newer, purposeful brands that resonate with today’s values.” Airlines can retain iconic signatures – a prestige Champagne or whisky that signals quality – while rotating smaller-batch or sustainably sourced alternatives that reflect emerging trends and work the crowd from economy to first. Smart packaging supports this agility. Lightweight cans, recyclable paper-based wine cartons and modular loading reduce waste and fuel burn, while still preserving the premium feel for passengers. “Sustainability shouldn’t be a constraint,” she argues, “it should drive innovation.”

Partnerships with eco-conscious distilleries and closed-loop recycling initiatives can transform waste management into a brand value rather than a sunken cost.

Innovation also extends to service design. Premium cabins might introduce “mixology moments,” while economy travellers benefit from self-serve hydration stations – creative yet sustainable enhancements that increase engagement without increasing waste.

And how should airlines measure the success of these innovations? Stevenson suggests looking beyond sales to what she calls resonance. “A beverage programme should be judged not only by revenue, but by memory value,” she says. “Do passengers recall and talk about what they drank onboard? That’s brand connection.” Metrics such as NPS, social sentiment, waste reduction, and partner ROI all play a role, but her ultimate KPI is simple: “Perhaps the best sign of success is whether they ask for a second.”



Kelly Stevenson

WTCE Beverages Ambassador
and JetVine Director



The Future of Onboard Commerce

While food and sustainability drive emotional loyalty, onboard retail remains a crucial engine for ancillary revenue. According to Kai Kosicki, WTCE Retail Technology Ambassador, Consultant for the Hayward Partnership and Founder of ExpAir, the next transformation will come from connectivity and data – not from duty-free catalogues.

“The main hurdle,” he explains, “is missing ground-to-air communication. Once internet connectivity is consistent, airlines can move beyond selling only what’s physically onboard.” This opens the door to virtual products, home-delivery partnerships and targeted digital retail – creating new revenue streams with minimal logistical cost.

Kosicki envisions a connected ecosystem where every passenger interaction becomes a commercial opportunity. Loyalty data, preferences and in-flight behaviour can inform personalised offers – from curated retail bundles to exclusive digital content. Airlines could even monetise post-flight experiences, extending their influence beyond the cabin.

However, this type of innovation brings complexity. Legal frameworks, tax regulations and union agreements may limit what can be sold or how commissions are distributed. Successful airlines will need to develop integrated operational strategies that align commercial, regulatory and crew considerations.

Looking further ahead, Kosicki forecasts profound technological shifts. “In the short term,” he says, “connectivity will change everything. In the mid-term, we’ll rethink cabin space – moving beyond traditional seating layouts, and in the long-term, communication may not even require devices.”

He also offers a sobering reflection on purpose: “With virtual meetings and immersive experiences, business travel may decline in the future. People will travel mainly for pleasure.” This insight reframes the future of retail: less about selling items and more about selling meaningful moments. Airlines that understand this psychological shift will thrive in the experiential economy of 2050.



Kai Kosicki

WTCE Retail Technology
Ambassador, Consultant for
the Hayward Partnership and
Founder of ExpAir

A New Passenger Ethos

Across sustainability, inclusivity, nutrition, beverages and retail, one theme unites all ambassadors: personalisation powered by intelligence. Whether it's AI optimising catering loads, QR codes verifying allergen safety, or data analytics predicting beverage and retail preferences, the next phase of passenger experience is defined by smart systems that feel human.

At its best, technology disappears into the background, allowing the passenger journey to feel intuitive, effortless and authentic. This is the promise of "invisible innovation" – the hallmark of the next generation of onboard hospitality. But personalisation alone is not enough. Airlines must also demonstrate purpose. Sustainability metrics must be visible; inclusivity must be proactive; wellbeing must be measurable. The brands that align these pillars will command the loyalty of a new kind of traveller – one who values transparency, empathy and ethical action as much as comfort or price.

As passenger numbers rise and environmental pressures intensify, the airlines that thrive in the future will be those that treat onboard hospitality not as a cost centre but as a value creator. They will measure success not only in revenue but in resilience, reputation and relationships.

The challenge is immense, but so is the opportunity. In the next decade, every decision about a meal, a material, or a menu will shape how passengers feel about flying itself. The roadmap for that future is where sustainability, wellbeing, inclusivity and innovation unite to create a sky that feels not only connected but cared for.



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