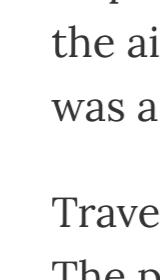


What airports can teach us about marketing in motion

Travel doesn't just comprise Point A and Point B — it also includes the space in between. How to deliver your message in this liminal zone.



Matthew Rothenberg

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Like many, we've been daydreaming about carefree travel. Who doesn't want to be liberated from the considerations and complications of the pandemic, especially during the holiday season?

Omicron and its cousins have added an air of risk to every trip, from family visits to business meetings to leisure destinations. But journeys of the imagination open up possibilities, instead of anxieties.

Current uncertainties melt away as we picture a warm beach and a cold margarita ... That's pretty easy to conjure up, even after all this time.

And airports, we remember those. The hellscape that is LaGuardia on a Sunday. Eating Gardetto's for breakfast. Deciding that the Starbucks line seems fine.

The further we got into this LaGuardia-to-Cozumel fantasy (yes, it got that specific), the more we got stuck on the airport experience — and the feeling of freedom air travel inspires. And the marketing that goes along with that strange impasse of waiting in line at the airport Starbucks before waiting at the gate for your flight to board? Turns out there was a lot to ponder.

Travel doesn't just comprise Point A and Point B — it also includes the space in between. The process of passing from here to there is an experience in [liminality](#). This concept was developed by 20th century anthropologists to describe global "rites of passage" from one life stage to another such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. Puberty, airports. Turns out they're not that dissimilar.

Liminality is a special phase in human experience when established social hierarchies and routines dissolve as the individual changes roles and status. In between is a liberating (and often scary) stretch where the person making the change has shed their old identity but hasn't yet adopted a new one — they're unusually open to different experiences that can change the trajectory of their lives in big ways or small.

To meet the psychological and practical challenges of liminality, cultures have commonly constructed ceremonies that are directed by trusted figures of authority. Rites of passage like baptism, initiation into social groups, weddings, and funerals are designed to structure the transition from one role to the next. Priests, rabbis, shamans, HR onboarding specialists, midwives — trusted experts who guide participants from one state to another.

But what does liminality have to do with marketing in airports? And what does marketing in airports have to do with you? Over the past century-plus, social scientists and philosophers have [applied the concept of liminality to literal journeys across geography](#) and to travelers' openness to new experiences en route.

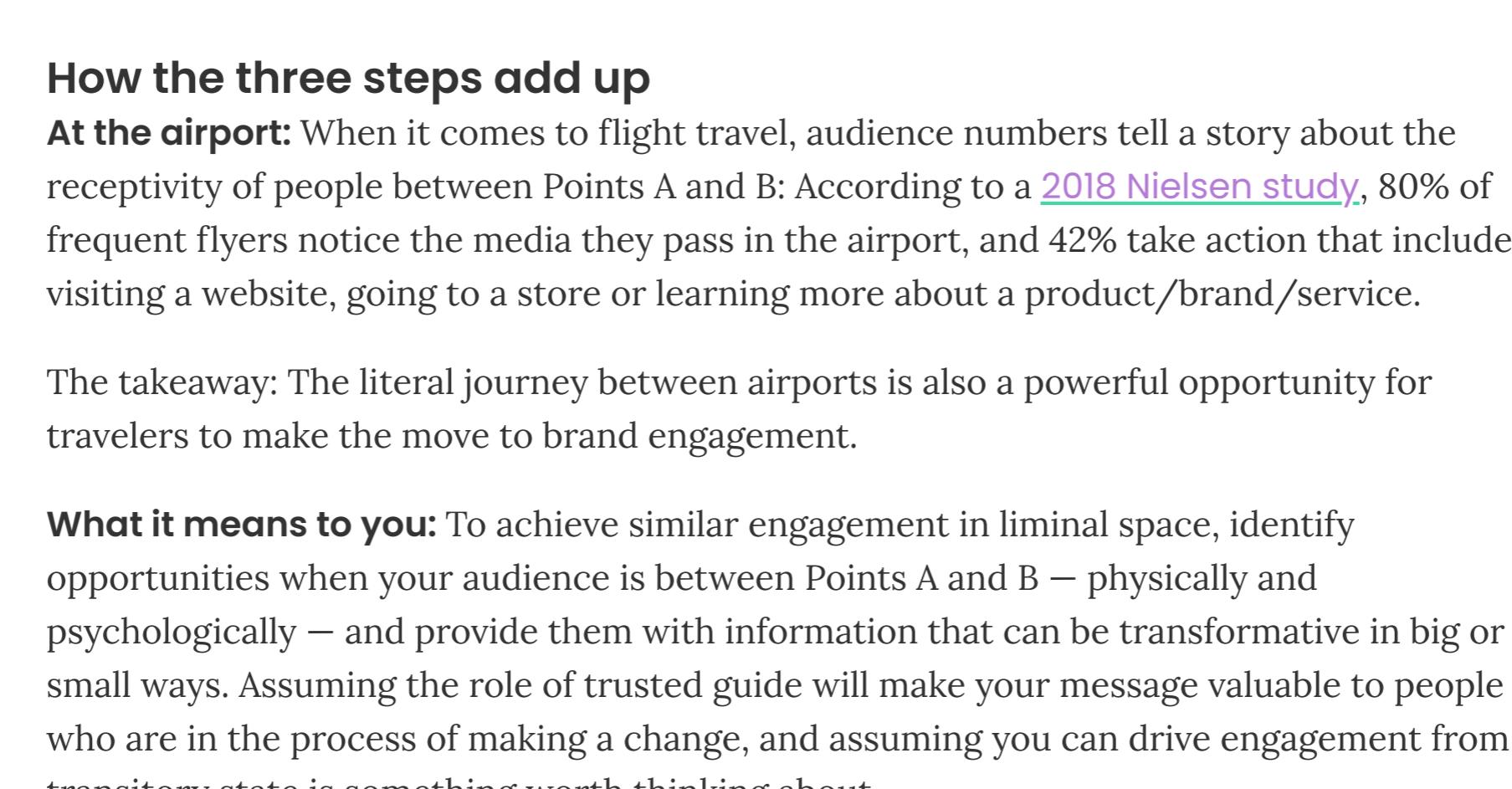
That openness includes brand messaging. Literally neither here nor there, people in trains, planes and automobiles are already changing locations; why not switch brands on the way? Enter LaGuardia with a naked wrist, exit Cozumel International Airport wearing a Rolex.

To connect with audiences on the move, marketers must assume the role of the trusted sage who guides the target audience from liminality to their new destination. The opportunity: to catch your audience in a liminal state, then introduce your message so your brand becomes part of the journey and the reward.

How to guide your audience through their transitory journey:

1. **Identify liminal moments** when the audience you want to reach is in a state of transition outside of their daily routine
2. **Engage the liminal audience** as a guide who can help them achieve goals and fulfill desires once their journey is complete
3. **Provide immediate opportunities** for the audience to take action on your guidance

It just so happens that airports, our new favorite place, are quite good at showing how this all comes together:



Identify liminal moments

At the airport: Airports and commercial flights are a pure example of messaging in motion. Security and altitude mean nobody's in that space besides air travelers and workers who support air travelers. Because they've got such a tightly controlled audience — and such a relatively wealthy one — airports and flights have also afforded brands a great laboratory for innovations in digital marketing.

What it means to you: Consider some other liminal spaces that are likely to catch a specific audience in between things. Some common examples already exploited for advertising include interactive screens in taxis and the walls above men's room urinals. Geofencing to reach smartphones in medical waiting rooms or on ski lifts doesn't seem a far cry from Rolex ads next to the airport Starbucks. Parking garages are an interesting liminal space to consider. Bars, too.

Guide the liminal audience to your message

At the airport: Picture a passenger collecting their carry-on items after the security check, then heading through the terminal in search of their gate. From ERP systems to perfume, cloud security to purses, chocolate to elastic cloud storage, messaging is almost exclusively for B2B products and luxury brands. (Good luck finding an airport billboard for a pizza chain or a domestic beer.)

Notice that an airport isn't actually a shopping mall for enterprise software or fashion goods; its actual function is as a transportation hub. The calculation, of course, is that air travel brings people with money to spend and business to conduct. What's more, these people are [already in a spending mindset](#). Whether the trip is for business or pleasure, the period between departure and arrival takes one out of their normal routine and puts them into a psychological space where big purchases are easier to imagine.

Marketers who create campaigns for airport terminals intercede at this crucial moment to suggest this audience should complete its journey in possession of luxury goods and business tools befitting worldly, empowered travelers.

What it means to you: Think about how your brand can guide audiences in liminal spaces — including spaces that aren't specifically designed for your product.

For thousands of years, bridges have spanned bodies of water as a means to ... get across that body of water. More recently, though, they've become popular locations for people to take another kind of leap: marriage proposal. In that context, marketing adjacent to bridges could guide someone in the liminal state between single and married to new opportunities in banking, home ownership and more. Could you communicate to that person about to take a leap into something great (or terrible)? Likely.

Help liminal audiences assume a new identity as your customers

At the airport: The passenger reaches their gate and pulls out their phone along with dozens of other passengers doing the same. Free WiFi and BYOD policies mean travelers can engage uninterrupted with the platforms they choose throughout the airport and onto the plane. That's prime time for them to act on the messaging they've encountered by exploring the brand's content or making a purchase.

What it means to you: Consider creating other opportunities to guide liminal audiences to action. Cellular networks are rapidly expanding to cover even the most remote liminal spaces, and the ubiquity of mobile devices means an engaged audience can follow your lead even if they're 35,000 feet in the air, in the middle of the ocean or [riding the subway](#).

How the three steps add up

At the airport: When it comes to flight travel, audience numbers tell a story about the receptivity of people between Points A and B: According to a [2018 Nielsen study](#), 80% of frequent flyers notice the media they pass in the airport, and 42% take action that includes visiting a website, going to a store or learning more about a product/brand/service.

The takeaway: The literal journey between airports is also a powerful opportunity for travelers to make the move to brand engagement.

What it means to you: To achieve similar engagement in liminal space, identify opportunities when your audience is between Points A and B — physically and psychologically — and provide them with information that can be transformative in big or small ways. Assuming the role of trusted guide will make your message valuable to people who are in the process of making a change, and assuming you can drive engagement from a transitory state is something worth thinking about.

Time to break out those Gardetto's and get to guiding.



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