



The Message of Midway

By B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore

“There is another message to be gleaned from our airport encounters.”

With all the heightened attention placed today on airport security – the extra passenger checkpoints, retrofitted inspection stations, and new boarding protocols all introduced since 9/11 - it’s easy to overlook the other great change taking place in our airports: the redesign of terminals from nondescript spaces merely taking people from curbside to gate for boarding, to memorable places increasingly offering an intentionally designed experience.

Consider Midway Airport in Chicago. In days gone by, the options for spending time (and money) before a flight’s departure were limited to a not-so-hot hot dog stand, an always-too-crowded cocktail bar, and a few all-too-quirky kiosks. Getting stranded at Midway for any significant length of time truly represented one of life’s most unpleasant experiences.

All that’s now changed! Arrive today and after deplaning you’ll soon find yourself immersed in the engaging Midway Boulevard, where you’ll happily spend a little time (and surely a little money). Here are a number of now-familiar lessons in evidence from examining Midway’s new look.

First, mark the spot. The mere fact that the space has been named something at all serves as a marker that this place is not just some pointless passageway; it’s a Vegas-like venue to be experienced. Just calling it Midway Boulevard marks the spot and cues folks that it’s not the usual fare. Do you have any unnamed space in your venue? Give it a name and thereby mark the spot – without neglecting, of course, to design an experience worthy of the name.

Midway Boulevard may be straightforwardly self-referential, but it’s certainly not overstated. Thus our second message from Midway: layer the theme. This, more subtle, approach works better than having some extravagant theme with little or nothing behind it in the way of supporting cues. Within Midway Boulevard, various establishments are aptly named to give definition to the “boulevard”: Harry Carey’s, Illinois Bar & Grill, Gold Coast Hot Dogs, Marketplace Chicago, and so forth.

Certain establishments reinforce the theme inside their places. For example, the Kid’s Corner themed its walls from various Chicago attractions – Aquarium, Museum of Natural History, Science & Industry Museum, Zoo & Aviary, and Planetarium – with

related merchandise displayed accordingly. This multi-tiered theming brings a certain integrity to the place. Do you carry out your theme throughout multiple tiers of experience? If not, your business may not represent anything better than the humdrum service outlets that litter our landscape.

Third, flow from the center. Faithful readers will recall this principle of establishing a center from our column on the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas. Midway Boulevard does this in a particularly interesting way: It clusters the establishments most readily recognized as relating to the Chicago theme at its core. Here, the place is at its most experientially intense. As one travels away from the center, one encounters more familiar, everyday outlets – Wilson Leather Goods, Hallmark Cards, Hudson News – until further transitioning to the rather normal-looking gates. In other words, Midway accentuates the experience as one approaches the center (and conversely, diminishes it as one recedes from the center). Do you have such integrity in your traffic flow, yielding a naturally dramatic structure to guests’ visits?

Finally, Midway Boulevard appeals to authenticity. With so many designed experiences now out there, people increasingly desire those that are “real”. This place appeals to this sentiment in various ways, including its use of natural materials such as earthy brick walls. The American Indian-themed store, Spirit of Red Horse, takes up a visibly prominent location. In places like Potbelly’s, worn signs and handwritten chalkboard specials abound. Yet Midway’s floors use the same surface as at its crosstown rival, O’Hare, reminding the traveler that he’s in a real airport and not an amusement park.

There’s nothing amusing about air travel these days, as new homeland security measures unavoidably intrude on our lives. But there’s another lesson to be gleaned from our airport encounters: If our nation seeks to regain economic vitality, we must stage more engaging experiences that encourage consumer spending. That’s the message of Midway.

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