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’s new look.

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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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