

How (not) to address airline passengers

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By Ingrid Piller | November 30, 2009 | Language & tourism, Recent Posts

Book your flight

Please provide the required Guest information.



1. Guest information

Passenger 1 - Adult (Lead Guest)

Title *	Mr.	Meal Preference	No Special Meal
First Name *	Mr.	Frequent Flyer Programme	none
Last Name *	Miss	Frequent Flyer Number	
Contact details for lead guest.			
Tel. No. Contact 1 *	HE	- Country Code -	- City Code - Number
Tel. No. Contact 2 *	HRH	- Country Code -	- City Code - Number
Email Address *	Ms.		
	Prof. (Mr)		
	Shaikha		
	Sheikh		

Remember my contact information for the next booking

Terms of address in intercultural communication can be a tricky business as [Kimiesan pointed out recently](#). One would think that airlines with their international customer base and tons of market research have it all sorted out, though. Not so. For years, KLM sent me special offers addressed to “Mrs Dr Ingrid Piller.” How difficult can it be for the marketing department of an international airline to figure out that you can’t combine titles in English? (unlike say in German and presumably in Dutch, too.)

I no longer get updates from KLM but now this. I was trying to book a flight with Etihad online and it seems the designers of the form had an urgent need to determine the gender of the traveler without making them tick a box for “female”/ “male.” Ok, fair enough, I can accept that; although one of the beauties of having a PhD as a female in this world is that I get away with not having to reveal my marital status through the use of “Miss,” “Ms” or “Mrs” when filling in forms. What really ticks me off in this form is that you don’t get a choice for the gender of “professor” but that this illustrious title only comes in the Mr-flavor. It’s hard to believe that there would be fewer female professors flying than brigadiers, captains, colonels, generals, shaikhas and sheikhs. And how come the airline doesn’t need to know the sex of brigadiers, captains, colonels and generals? There may be few female brigadiers, captains, colonels and generals but surely if they are allowed to have a gender-neutral term of address, doctors and professors are entitled to the same.

In the end, I clicked on “Prof. (Mr)” although, seeing that the gender was wrong, I was tempted to go for something equally false and a bit more exotic such as “shaikha” as the term by which I wish to be addressed by airline personnel ...

AIRPORT

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