Hadley

Air Travel and Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** With vision loss, getting ready for that plane trip might involve thinking about a few extra things besides what to pack in your suitcase. In this episode, James Ashworth, vice president of customer care for Southwest Airlines joins us to share some tips. I'm Ricky Enger, and this is Hadley Presents. Welcome to the show. James. I'm so happy to have you here.

**James Ashworth:** Ricky, thank you for the opportunity to be here. I'm looking forward to our conversation today.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes, me as well. Now it's wintertime and I am perfectly content to stay inside, but as we get towards spring, I think I'm going to be ready to take a plane trip or two, and I suspect I'm not the only one. So this is a question that comes up a lot when we talk with people here at Hadley. We have a travel talk discussion group as well, and a lot of times people will share tips and tricks, but they also come in with those questions of, "I'm thinking about taking a trip, but I'm a little apprehensive. There's a lot I don't know." So I am delighted to have you here to discuss those things. So before we jump into those questions and tips and tricks, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself and what you do at Southwest.

**James Ashworth:** Sure, I'd be glad to. As you stated, my name is James Ashworth. I have the fortunate opportunity to serve as vice president of customer care for a great airline called Southwest Airlines. Customer care is primarily responsible for all inbound outbound customer communication. Think about things like social and email and phone calls and chats with teams that I support, those are the teams that you'd be talking to and interacting with if you were to fly and communicate with Southwest Airlines. I've been in the industry for more years than I want to account for, but it's been three decades, Ricky, that I've been in the industry. And so, I know a little bit about airports and would love to talk about the different airports and navigating them. I was also diagnosed with macular degeneration. So, I not only have a little bit of experience from the airline industry, but I've also experienced vision loss and navigating travel because I've traveled a lot for my career. I think we can have a really good discussion today and I'm looking forward to it.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, me too. And yeah, I imagine you have indeed traveled a lot. There are probably certain airports that you could tell many a story about because you've been in them quite a bit.

**James Ashworth:** Yeah, for sure.

**Ricky Enger:** So I think knowledge is power, and a lot of times when we are stressed out about something, it's because we don't know how we're going to get through it. There's not those little tips and tricks and we're thinking, well, I have to figure it out on my own and I'm going to have to think on my feet and things like that. But if we know some of these things ahead of time, that makes the whole process a little easier because at least we have some idea of what to expect. So that's what I hope to do with this conversation here. So I want to just go through some of these common things that people have to think through when they're figuring out, "Okay, I'm ready to jump on a plane. What do I need to know?" So I guess the first part of that is before you can go somewhere, before they let you on the plane, you've got to have a ticket to be there. So what are some ways that people may think about this a little differently with vision loss?

**James Ashworth:** Yeah, great question. I think there's two things that I believe, I believe education and experience will build confidence. So when you enter the airport, you're entering the airport itself, and so they have employees that work for the airport.

Then you have to go through security with TSA and you're inside the airport and then you're in the care of the particular airline that operates out of those airports. So you have multiple entities, and most airlines have a toll-free number that you can reach out to when you're inspired to travel. And you can call to book, or you can go to that website. And from my experience most, not all, most carriers have very accessible websites as well. So I always think that to get started, you want to educate yourself on the airline that you're going to travel on, understand what are the rules and regulations around a particular airport. When I talk about this with audiences, I also encourage audiences to get familiar with the airport’s website because there could sometimes be construction happening at airports, and you'll want to understand that as you navigate your way into and through an airport.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. I know that my home airport, the Charlotte Airport, seems to have been under construction for probably the last three or four years, and so it's been a matter of figuring out, okay, which terminal is going to have issues this time around? But you bring up a couple of really interesting points. So if you want to talk to a human, give the airline a call and they'll be able to help you book. Or if you're comfortable with your assistive technology, you don't have to worry so much because so many of these airline websites are accessible.

You don't have to worry so much about is my screen reader going to work with this, or my contrast settings going to work with this? Generally they do, but this planning ahead thing, so that goes quite nicely into my next question. Once that ticket has been purchased, what are some things to think about as you're planning ahead before you ever leave the house? And one of those is getting familiar with the airline's website and seeing what construction there is, et cetera. Are there other things that people can do before they step foot inside that airport just to get an idea of what's there or what they might need to think about?

**James Ashworth:** Yeah, I think so. In addition to just checking out the airport’s website, understand what gates you're going to and the different terminals that exist in certain airports. You have larger airports, and you have smaller airports, so being very familiar with the footprints and individual airports I think is really, really key. Most of the airlines, Southwest included, when you book your flight, you have the option to sign up for notifications related to the delays or cancels. If that option is available to you on the particular airline that you're on, I would absolutely encourage listeners to do that and as a first prep. That way, if anything happens with your flights, you'll be notified via the channel that you would prefer. If that's email or text or in some cases, a phone call. I would absolutely encourage listeners to sign up for notification so that you can stay informed.

Beyond that, I think you want to look at both sides of your travel as well, not just getting to the airport that you're flying into, but you'll want to get familiar with the airport that you're leaving from. You want to make sure you understand both airports, and then if you have connections and you have an airport in the middle, you'll want to make sure you understand that as well. Is your airplane coming into one terminal and perhaps your second leg is leaving out of another terminal depending on the airport. You want to be very familiar with that. And then once you're inside the airport, I always recommend talking to airport personnel. We train our employees to care for customers, I believe most airlines do. I don't fly them all, but when I have most airline employees really take the customer's care seriously. And so I think it's important when you get to the airport to connect with them.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, so many great points there. And just thinking about if you are accustomed to looking up at that gate notice or those announcements that happen, and sometimes they only happen on the big screens and such, and maybe you've traveled, and you're accustomed to doing that. Now, signing up for those notifications that are outside this screen that you can't see anymore is such a good idea. And getting from terminal to terminal I know can be quite a chore. For example, I always think about the Atlanta airport. They have the plane train where you get on it to go from terminal to terminal, and just knowing that you have to do that ahead of time, you can prepare yourself, "Okay, I know I'm going to have to jump on this thing and get to the next terminal." And as you said, talking to the employees of the airport, that's what they're there for. So knowing that it's not just you alone, there are people around you who can help. I think that's a wonderful thing.

**James Ashworth:** I also think each airline has their own individual app, so I'd also say, have your technology ready. For me personally, a couple of pieces of technology that I use that are helpful for me when I'm traveling in and around the city and through airports, I think about things like Aira, Seeing AI, or Be My Eyes. Those are pieces of technology that help me navigate. And so the airline has an app, having that downloaded and then having those pieces of technology to help you navigate the signs and the screens at the airport, maybe concessions and those types of things. I think those are also really good things to have ready and available long before you head to an airport.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, because it could turn out that you don't need that at all. Perhaps you have asked an airline employee for assistance and they get you through TSA or get you to your gate. If there is a piece of technology that can assist you better to have it all installed and ready to go, then to be standing there in the middle of the airport trying to fiddle with it and get it going.

What are some ways that you do use, say, Aira or Be My Eyes? I know for me, when I get to the airport, there was nothing so freeing for me as walking from the airport doors all the way through to the gate independently without a human guide or someone from the airport assisting me, as great as they are at that, it was nice to be able to just stroll at my pace and do it. And I did that using Aira, connecting to a human on the other end who's looking through my camera and giving me some directions. Do you use that to find food, or do you use Be My Eyes for things? How do you do that?

**James Ashworth:** Yes. I mostly use a combination of Seeing AI and Aira. I like talking to a human and being able to communicate and navigate. There are a couple of airports that I'm very familiar with where I fly in and out of regularly, where I have family, where we have work responsibilities. Those airports become easier and easier to navigate the more that I get in and out of them. But when I'm in a new airport, I know that airports have ground transportation. I know that they have concessions and I know they have signage for most of those things. Seeing AI doesn't get me what I need because I do want to be a little more independent versus having to utilize somebody. Then I'll utilize an Aira.

In most cases, I can navigate for concessions and finding food and reading venues. And the concession stands are another entity. I talked about the three different entities that run airports, but then the different vendors are each individually separate and don't operate the same. And so use them to navigate either to concessions, a concession stand, and then once I'm there, I may jump off of Aira and then use Seeing AI to read the menu. Those are some of the ways that I use it. It's also extremely helpful for me when I'm looking for an Uber or any ride-share service, I will typically utilize Aira because I want to make sure I'm getting in and out of the right vehicle, and I'll share with them what my vehicle is, and then they'll help me navigate that way. And for that, I prefer Aira.

**Ricky Enger:** That makes sense. And what if someone doesn't have a smartphone or they're not super comfortable using it yet? Are there particular segments of airline employees who will assist someone from say the TSA to the gate, or does that work differently for each airline? I know that when I travel, it's usually someone who has been contracted by the airport, but who is outside the airline who will do that. So is that the same across the board?

**James Ashworth:** I won't say it's the same across the board. I will say it is most common.

**Ricky Enger:** Gotcha.

**James Ashworth:** Because every airport operates somewhat independently, but most airline employees, obviously Southwest for sure, and then the airlines that I've known, will help you navigate getting in and out of the airport. But basically what you do is let them know if you have accessibility needs, so the personnel at the airline will be aware of what your accessibility is. Then, they would know when James Ashworth walks up and checks in, they can look at the PNR and know, hey, there's an accessibility need. They can ask you what services you might need or what help you might need getting around the airport.

**Ricky Enger:** That's great. We talked about getting to the airport and to your plane and such, and presumably you're traveling with some kind of bag, maybe it's a carry-on, or maybe you’ve checked baggage. Do you have any thoughts whether they are technical in nature or not about how people can find their bag once it's time to grab it?

**James Ashworth:** Yeah, this is where you can get really creative. You can use tactile markers on your particular bag. If you check a bag, depending on your level of vision, you can use a color striping. I've seen that done before. Those are what I'd call non-technical if you will. And then there are some more advanced things that you can do like AirTags. Recently I've talked to individuals, and I have an AirTag inside my bag if I have to check it, but AirTags are easy to help you locate. And there's other pieces of technology that you could stick in your bag that you can use apps on your phone to send an audible alert inside your bag to help you locate it.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes, I have one called Tile. It's really pretty cool. Yeah.

**James Ashworth:** Yeah. And that's one piece of technology, low-tech technology, but it is helpful, and I think there's many others out there. And so doing a little bit of research online to find things like Tile or comparable products or AirTags or comparable products, I think it'd be really key. And then drop those in your bag and have a little bit of confidence. I'll give you a quick story. The AirTag is pretty interesting. My wife and I were traveling, and I have the AirTag in my bag and I checked it. I didn't know this until I traveled the first time with an AirTag in my bag but if you get separated from the AirTag, it will tell you the last time we saw your bag was at the airport and you're like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Did my bag not get on the airplane?"

So you want to make sure if you have something as sophisticated as an AirTag, that you set it up in such a way that it knows that your bag is traveling with you. And when you're distanced from the AirTag, you just got to be aware that it doesn't signal anything too bad. Now many airlines have bag tracking capabilities inside that mobile app that I mentioned earlier. So you can also do that as another level of confidence as it relates to your bag as well. Some airlines will tell you when it's checked, when it's on the airplane, when it's off, when it's on the carousel, those types of things. So that's why it's another really good reason to make sure that you have the airlines app downloaded on your phone if you have a smartphone.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. So a lot of what we've talked about feels pretty smooth, you get your ticket and that's all accessible. You're talking to a human or you do it through a website, you get to the airport, and you've got your technology or your people who can assist you through all that. What about when things don't go so smoothly and something goes wrong? Maybe it's a plane delay or a gate change, or you missed your connecting flight or whatever. No one wants that to happen, but are there any extra logistics that someone with vision loss should think about just to be prepared for that eventuality? And then what do you do when it happens? So you're not caught like, "Uh-oh, I didn't think about that."

**James Ashworth:** Yeah. After being in this industry for over three decades, I could tell you that no airline really wants irregular operations. One thing your listeners might not know is when an airline has a disruption, which means that not only do customers get disrupted, but it also means that the plane is not where the airline intended it to be. The crew themselves is not where the airline intended it to be. Flight attendants, pilots, and so all of those things were very disruptive for the airline. Just know as much as customers don't like it, neither do we as an airline. But they are unavoidable for sure. The most important thing, I think that we've really already talked about this, probably the single most important thing that I think travelers should do is sign up for travel modifications with the individual airline.

That is the way that the airline can communicate to a lot of customers in real time about what's going on. If whatever reason you don't believe your technology is serving you well, you want to immediately talk to airline personnel. They always want to help you get rerouted where possible. And sometimes it's not always easy by the way, rerouting customers can be very difficult for an airline just because there's so many disruptions that happen across the country, and when one airline is having a problem, in most cases, so is the other one, because of what's happening at an airport in a particular city. So if the technology is not serving you well, do make it a point to get in the customer service line and talk to airport personnel and let them help you navigate a particular cancellation or delay.

**Ricky Enger:** That makes sense. So making sure maybe that you're sitting next to the gate so that you know where the gate agent is, or is it better probably to talk with someone in person, or should people also have certain phone numbers programmed in to speak with someone that way, which works better? Or maybe it's a combination of both?

**James Ashworth:** Yeah, I'd say it's a combination of both. The customer care professionals that you'll talk to through chat or email or over the phone, they'll be willing to help you navigate as best they can, but airport personnel are there as well. If the lines are longer than you care to stand in, it might be helpful to reach out to the airline's customer care department. There's many of them over the phone that can help and assist. Most airlines will have capabilities for cancellations and delays where you can adjust your flight online. For Southwest, and I believe this is true for most carriers, we try to make rebooking after a disruption really, really fast and easy because we know those things are frustrating for customers.

And so for Southwest, as an example, when we cancel or delay your flight or after a period of time, we allow you the opportunity to make an adjustment right there inside the mobile app or on the website. And so that's always available. And in most cases, it's probably the easiest because you can look through your list of options. If you're traveling with a party, you can talk about where everybody needs to go, what’s the timing and what everything look like? And so you can work on that together. It allows you to look at all of your options at one time and spend the time that you need with it. When there's a long line that you have waited in, you feel like there's pressure behind you to move on so they can help somebody else because that's how we are, just care for one another. But being inside that mobile app allows you the opportunity to search for those things on your own.

**Ricky Enger:** That's great. Wow. We've really covered quite a lot. I feel like just a ton of tips and tricks and little things to think about maybe a little differently than you did before. If you're new to vision loss or even if you've been traveling with vision loss for quite some time, maybe you've picked up a tip or two. As we wrap up, James, I'm wondering if there's anything you're hoping listeners will take from this. Maybe someone has been considering traveling and just putting it off because man, it's a lot. The airport's a bit chaotic at the best of times, and people feel that sense of trepidation or maybe I'm not ready. What would you say to listeners maybe in that situation?

**James Ashworth:** Yeah, just a couple of quick things. I think anyone who's nervous or has trepidation, I would encourage you to maybe travel with somebody the first time. If you're like me and there are airports that you frequent, I can assure you that you will have more confidence. The more you go in and out of a particular airport you'll just get familiar with the airport layout. You'll get familiar with the concessions, and when things are different, you'll recognize it, you'll be able to ask. I think that builds confidence, and so I would absolutely encourage your listeners to just try it, give it a try. The other thing is Airlines for America, it's an organization that most airlines are a part of, and they work with the government to work on accessible air travel. The more our community travels and shares feedback, the better we as an industry become. More familiarization, education and experience will build confidence, and we all hope that you'll get out there and travel. If I can be of any assistance, I'm happy to do it.

**Ricky Enger:** That's great. I love that. And you're so right about building confidence when you do it once, maybe something goes wrong, maybe it goes perfectly smoothly, but either way, you made it to the other side, and it gives you just that much more motivation to try it again. Thank you so much, James. You've been just a wealth of information. I really appreciate your taking the time to chat and share that knowledge with us, and I hope that if you are listening and you've been on the fence about travel and maybe you're missing someone, you want to see your family or whatever it is, this will serve as that catalyst to say, "Hey, I think I could do it."

**James Ashworth:** Well, thank you. I totally agree with you, Ricky. Glad to have been a part of the conversation today and look forward to maybe another time where we talk about maybe the next level of travel.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. Thank you so much, James.

**James Ashworth:** Thank you.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say, share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents, or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadleyhelps.org, that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @hadleyhelps.O-R-G or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.