

Touch vs.

A story about international parking culture.

By Michael Klein, CAPP, and Pieter Sprinkhuizen

Culture is something we all have in common but that also makes us different. All things in life are observed through our own culturally influenced lenses. This applies to everyday life—the food we eat, the music we listen to, and the way we interact with others, and certainly also our professional lives. Considering the parking industry from European as well as American viewpoints, we'll see through two culturally influenced perspectives the similarities and differences in the international parking and transportation industry throughout the world.

Tech

Zero-emission Smart Fortwo vehicle parked on the street. This model is one of the most popular electric city cars in Europe.

Even though European and North American parking professionals are all part of the Western world, the differences between the European Old World charm and newer, expansive, American cultures are enormous. Take the ways time is perceived: An American may consider a 200-year-old building ancient, but that may be the age of the home where a European person was raised! Also, consider distances and population densities. The European Union (EU) is half the size of the U.S. and has a larger population (510 million people in the EU vs. 325 million people in the U.S.), with land use providing for denser populations that offer less living space per capita and greater use of transit-oriented development (TOD).

Europeans consider 100 miles a long drive (and likely prefer to take the train), while that distance is a fun road trip for many Americans. In the U.S. this distance could mean that you are going to the next city or state, whereas in Europe you could easily end up in another country (or maybe pass one entirely).

Europeans are used to traveling abroad, both internationally and intercontinentally, as they have been doing so since childhood.

On the Road

Look at the cars we drive: Europeans tend to drive smaller cars with rounder designs instead of the big, square-shaped cars popular in the U.S. Those smaller European-style cars get better gas mileage, which helps with the high price of fuel in Europe (the European gas tax is much higher than the American—about two-thirds and one-fifth of total fuel price, respectively) and makes it easier to squeeze into the limited amount of parking, especially in historic cities that were established before cars existed. The most popular vehicle in the U.S. is the Ford F series truck, but it's the quite small Volkswagen Golf in Europe. It's a huge difference in both size and design—America goes big, and Europe goes small.

Seeing roads built for both cars and bicycles is not unusual in cities such as Amsterdam, where biking is a primary mode of transportation.



Doing Business

Let's consider how business meetings vary between the two worlds. Scheduling a meeting is easier in Europe than it is in the U.S.—in Europe, when a meeting is set, it is set. There is no need to confirm as is often done in the U.S. Moreover, during business meetings, Americans may interact with clients, colleagues, and other peers in a more social way than in Europe. And during social events at conferences and trade shows, as well as during informal gatherings, colleagues become friends during the years. In many European countries, friendship may be getting too close to business from a social point of view, and such contacts may lead to issues in the future.

According to Peter Martens, former board member of the European Parking Association (EPA) and Dutch Parking Association (Vexpan), EU laws on public bids are so strict that even brief contacts between municipalities and vendors at events such as trade shows could result in disqualification during the bid process. Dinner meetings are, therefore, rare, and breakfast meetings are virtually nonexistent in Europe.

Parking Conferences

Trade shows are the main events for European parking industry associations, and they focus on the physical exhibition of product offerings to practitioners. At trade shows, such as Amsterdam's biennial event Intertraffic (where the authors of this article first met), exhibitors have enormous booths—in some cases larger than 4,000 square feet. Exhibition show hours are from early morning to late afternoon, non-stop, every day. Off-show hours are primarily spent with direct colleagues rather than with peers.

U.S. events are more conference than trade shows and are more social in nature. Networking and sharing

information and knowledge builds trust and elevates the parking profession; interacting with peers is the main focus. Despite this, some secrets remain guarded to maintain a competitive advantage. In the U.S., there is time for exhibitors to show their offerings to the parking industry, but this is not necessarily the event's main focus. Off-show hours are often spent with peers as the events take place in large hotels with convention centers; in Europe, convention centers are typically stand-alone venues.

Technology and Progress

Europe had a head start advancing automated parking technology and multiple payment platforms because of land-use decisions designed to work with density, supply and demand, and economic factors. Europe provides substantial TOD, and through use of market forces (namely the cost of parking), discourages use of cars in dense urban environments. American land-use priorities, changes to zoning, and TOD are now progressing at an enormous pace, and it is now unclear whether any continent is ahead of the other. There is at least one very significant difference: the human factor and how we satisfy customer needs.

In Europe, our industry now focuses on high tech and low touch, with technology and automation solutions to centralize processes and eliminate the human factor as much as possible. This reduces costs, errors, shrinkage, and service variability. The U.S. approach to date has been based on the exact opposite—low tech and high touch, although rapid change is underway. Even though technology is important and may provide high levels of service, in many cases the human factor is even more important in the new world. A properly trained valet parking attendant offers hospitality-level service with a professional appearance and demeanor, added sense of security, and a



The interior of an Amsterdam parking garage.

personal touch to parking. What American would drive five blocks farther and walk through the rain rather than pay a few dollars extra for valet parking? In many American cities, people are willing to pay a bit extra for service and store their car at a place close to their final destination and that appears to be safe (not that we are creating a bailment!).

Nigel Williams, chair of the British Parking Association, has identified a technology oriented philosophy: “Our Parking 20:20 initiative follows research commissioned to explore the future of parking and intelligent mobility. The research identified seven key areas for further study, research, and development. These are data and apps; payment; integration; real-time data; shared mobility and car clubs; electric vehicle charging; and autonomous vehicles.”

The Similarities

Despite the differences between the European and American parking industries, not everything is dissimilar. We all want to evolve in what we do and have better lives for our children. We also feel a common bond being in an industry where the ability to work with people, things, and ideas provides challenges, opportunities, and rewards. When this manifests itself in gaining knowledge, increasing business, expanding operations, or a consolidation in day-to-day activities, we are advancing professionally. This is where our respective parking associations have their raison d'être.

Both in the EU and the U.S., organizations have similar roles and approaches. Parking associations are the mortar connecting all that is parking and transportation. They offer a platform for networking and sharing knowledge to elevate the parking profession. This can be done on various levels: regional, national, continental, and even intercontinental. Most of the activities take place on a regional and national level, but during a recent interview, Peter Dingemans, EPA chairman,

talked about how the individual national parking associations found themselves confronted with cross-border issues, economic development opportunities, and similar change management challenges. Therefore, the need to establish a pan-European organization became apparent. The authors believe this European situation also applies to the U.S., as there is substantial cooperation between associations at the international, national, regional, and state levels. On an intercontinental level, there are joint initiatives with IPI actively presenting U.S. parking industry-related subjects at European events.

In summary, there are many similarities and differences in our daily lives and within today's parking industries. Nobody knows what the future will bring, but we expect the world of parking to become more unified over time. America, Europe, and other continents will benefit from knowledge of each other's developments.

The Future

Looking to the years ahead, the U.S. development of the autonomous vehicle is progressing at an immense speed, with substantial implications for last-mile challenges. In Brussels, Belgium, steps are being taken to create interoperable systems to enhance communications between different products and manufacturers, according to Martens. Another important joint European effort is the development of a payment standard in parking where the common terminal acquirer protocol for payment terminals in the Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) and international parking industry payments standard advance us toward a unified payment platform, Dingemans says.

The European Parking Association and IPI are involved in this discussion, making possible a global payment solution in parking. Although the specifics remain a thing of the future, one thing is certain: There are exciting times ahead! 📍



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