

Clean Sweep

Joanne Paternoster explains why 'clean' airports score highly in customer satisfaction surveys.

Hair in the sink, fingerprints on the mirror, tissues on the floor, waste containers overflowing with hygiene items, broken lavatories, unidentified liquid on the floor, tacky floors – do these examples portray a vivid mental picture?

What emotional response did these images conjure up? What 'ambience' do these images create? Would you feel safe in this place?

These features are obviously characteristics of a dirty restroom. And while the visualisation may offend your sensitivities, it might be the best way to identify with the emotional intensity your customers experience in an unclean environment.

Such a visual enables you to appreciate, at least in part, the impact of cleanliness on customer satisfaction at your airport. Negative customer behaviour is further intensified when unclean or poorly maintained conditions are visible elsewhere in the airport.

Why is customer satisfaction important?

Aviation is a service industry, and like all service industries, your customers have choices. And today, their choice of airports is expanding. Still, even if their airport choices are limited, they will choose how they'll spend their time and whether they'll spend their money while at your airport. Customers are also compelled, especially when dissatisfied, to tell other people about their experiences. These individuals may have even more choice about which airports to use.

Customer choices will impact your airport's bottom line. And the choices you



make in terms of serving your customers will impact on your costs and your revenues. There is a relationship between customer satisfaction and net revenues. That's why customer satisfaction is so critical. If you can maximise the convergence between the choices you have made with those that your customers will make, you are positioned to maximise your net revenues.

Your airport must be customer-centric and results-driven to do so successfully. If it isn't, you'll never know if you're getting the most from your investments and service programmes.

Who is your customer?

This question may appear to be gratuitous because there isn't a single answer; nor is there a right or wrong answer. The importance of this question is knowing the right answer for your airport and being confident the definition of 'customer' is shared with your business partners and employees.

Are passengers your only customers? How about the meeters and greeters and the other airport employees? What is the

relationship between airports and airlines? Between airports and concessions? Are airlines and concessionaires your business partners or your customers? Are all customers equal? Will you serve each in the same way?

Describing your customer's characteristics, understanding the needs of your customers, airport partners and employees, and determining customer priorities are essential in defining your brand.

Every customer deserves and expects good service and each airport should establish service standards that assure all customers' expectations are met. Some customers have unique needs. Some are willing to pay for a higher level of service. These are legitimate considerations when deciding to offer service that, in certain instances, exceeds your standard.

You can make smarter service investments by understanding your customers and those aspects of their experience that most directly impact attitudes, intentions, and ultimately behaviour.



Super clean Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport. Image courtesy of Vito Palmisano.

What is your airport's brand?

Is your airport friendly and helpful? Is it modern and efficient? Is it crowded, intimidating and confusing? What brand comes to mind when you think about your various experiences in airports? The establishment of service and design standards as well as the implementation of brand messaging programmes are essential to assuring consistently excellent service while differentiating your airport in the eyes of the customer.

If you do not consciously work to define and communicate your brand, it will be defined for you. Your customers already have a perception of your airport and the collective service that is being delivered by the airport operator and its business partners. Hopefully, it is the brand you have established for your airport and not an ad hoc or serendipitous one.

What are your customers' top priorities?

Your customers' top priorities are those essential few items that must be addressed. Your customers have identified

them as areas that are important and where performance can be improved. Subsequently, they drive their satisfaction. In effect, they are the, "big bang for the buck" items and initially are the "low hanging fruit". As a result, each airport will have certain top priorities that are unique to their environment, but more often than not, there are certain universal priorities that show up consistently for many airports in customer satisfaction surveys.

It is important to acknowledge that the safety and security of your customers is your number one priority. 'On-time' departure and arrival, accurate baggage handling, choice of destinations and schedules and ticket price are all drivers of customer satisfaction. But whether they would appear on your customers' top priorities list depends on how well your airport performs in these areas.

Cleanliness, especially in restrooms, often appears on most airports' top priority list. As does the courtesy of personnel, the quality and variety of concessions and the security screening and check-in processes at airports across the globe, with customer focus on the

latter two procedures increasing dramatically since the horror events of 9-11.

Reliable customer feedback systems are a must. They enable you to know your customers' top priorities and manage for results that matter most. In addition, they allow you to know when customer priorities change.

If cleanliness is a top priority, how clean is clean?

That depends. How clean is your airport today and what's the condition of your facilities? How satisfied are your customers with your performance in these areas? The answers to these questions will tell you how much cleanliness drives satisfaction at your airport today.

Customers often interpret poor or worn conditions as unclean even if they have been scrubbed clean. They may also incorrectly assume poor conditions such as ripped seats as evidence of vandalism and feel unsafe as a result.

A formula for success is: customer satisfaction = performance – customer expectations. You can be certain customer satisfaction will improve if you manage your performance and address your customers' expectations. Recognise that other airports are also working to improve customer satisfaction and as they achieve breakthrough results, your customer's expectations rise. Depending on your perspective, this can be a management opportunity or a management nightmare.

Are there lessons to be learned from other service industries?

Cleanliness is a basic expectation in today's modern civilised world. A recent study conducted by Maritz Research in conjunction with a large international hotel chain found that 'cleanliness deficiencies' surrounding the bathroom toilet and bed coverings were most likely to cause guest defections.

Such findings guide management as they make investment and operational decisions.

Studies such as this also demonstrate that you can manage customer satisfaction by defining your brand and setting brand standards, determine current performance, customer satisfaction levels and costs and establish them as baseline measures, setting realistic targets for each, which in unison with your business partners implementing action plans, can achieve desired results.

This approach has a successful track record. Airports, using this approach, achieve consistent improvements in

customer satisfaction and financial performance. It can be established airport-wide be introduced within a business function such as concessions or parking. It is also an iterative self-correcting approach that will allow you to determine the point of diminishing returns and the corresponding impact of management investment decisions on customer satisfaction and the bottom-line.

Several airports have emphasised cleanliness to a point of diminishing returns. For instance, customers started to complain that the restroom floors were often wet and negative connotations were assumed as to the cause. Reliable feedback systems when appropriately used can forewarn the approach of the point of diminishing returns and corrective action can be taken.

Can older facilities compete with new airports?

New terminals sometimes receive poor customer satisfaction scores due to inadequate and poorly located concessions. While older facilities might receive outstanding scores because they performed well on customer priorities and exceeded customer expectations. Customer service is more than bricks and mortar.

When done well, it's an attitude. It's a philosophy. It's a way of business life. Brand new facilities designed with the customer in mind go a long way to assure high levels of satisfaction, but in and of themselves they are not a guarantee.

Other benefits of establishing a customer-centric and results driven airport environment

There are several identifiable benefits. An airport can burnish its image in the eyes of its customers, employees, business partners, Board and other important constituencies. Customers and other members of the airport community do not know and often do not appreciate what you do for them and why you do it. This is why it is so important to inform them. If you do not manage your airport's image, others will manage it or mismanage it for you. If you are managing a positive airport image you may be spending a lot of time accepting awards. If your airport's image is negative, you will be spending a lot of time managing complaints and other troublesome 'noise'.

A customer-centric, results-driven airport approach also provides the knowledge and the plan of action you and

your airport partners need to establish a two-way conversation with your customers, especially your most valuable customers. It helps manage customer expectations while informing them about your brand.

It allows you to establish customer relationships and to utilise those relationships to identify new services that will further increase customer satisfaction and revenue. By assuring the involvement and buy-in of the entire airport community every step of the way, you are assuring the probability of successfully achieving the results that you have identified as critical to your airport's success.

Lastly, whether or not you have identified airport employees as customers, the power of this invaluable resource is quite significant. By educating, engaging, and energising your employees you put a positive face on your airport's brand. The power of many focused on the essential few can be immeasurable, or as a popular US commercial totes, 'priceless'.

Does the CEO have to establish the vision?

The ideal way for successful companies in all industries is to start customer service improvement programmes at the top. But sometimes you cannot wait for an enlightened visionary to take the helm. Everyone has a sphere of influence and everyone can identify at least one customer even if it's their boss. Set the standard, manage for results, and burnish your business unit's image. Management will notice. Sometimes seeds need to

be planted that, over time, take on momentum. Often, the fruits of these efforts are embraced by higher levels within the organisation. Change engines are catalysts that can benefit the organisation no matter where they reside.

Managing airport performance or managing customer expectations?

Customer satisfaction = airport performance – customer expectations. Both are equally important to success. Your customers have greater access to information than ever before, and they know how to use it. Improving customer service and customer satisfaction require understanding the impact of customer expectations on their perception of your airport operation. This is made more complex by the fact that customers judge an airport's performance based on the collective performance of various airport partners that make up your service chain.

Airports that are customer-centric and results-driven generate delighted customers, positive word of mouth, increased employee motivation, a desirable airport image, and a positive impact on the bottom-line.

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About the author

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Customer-centric and results-driven approach