

Excellent airport customer service meets successful branding strategy

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Abstract

Excellent customer service is the synergy created when an airport's ability to exceed its customers' needs and expectations consistently matches its customers' perception that their needs and expectations are well met. This is particularly challenging in the airport environment where, although many are responsible for the delivery of services, the customer and other stakeholders often hold the airport operator accountable for the level of service provided airport-wide. If airport management takes a strategic and holistic approach to customer service and airport branding, customer satisfaction with the airport experience can be significantly improved and airport net revenues can be tracked to show a direct relationship with increased customer satisfaction.

Keywords

customer service, airport branding, performance management, standards, employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

We are all customers of one sort or another, and we all intuitively understand and strongly defend our own wants, needs and expectations of services and products when we are the customer. Given this innate human skill, why are we not all equally adept at providing excellent customer service when we take off our customer hat and put on our airport management hat? We understand what it means to be a customer and we even have internalised what 'great' versus

'abominable' service looks like and feels like, yet we often have difficulty providing excellent service to our airport customers.

Airports are not unique in this regard. A 2005 Forrester Research survey, for example, revealed that 96 per cent of senior executives say improving the customer experience is either 'critical' or 'very critical' to the future success and growth of their companies. Concurrent with this, the survey indicates that a majority of firms confess to delivering 'sub-par experiences to customers'.¹ As

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further food for thought, a 2004 CRMGuru survey has reported that over 70 per cent of customers have stopped using a company's products or services due to issues related to customer service, yet management thought they had left due to issues of price or changing needs (Figure 1).²

If airport management takes a strategic and holistic approach to customer service and airport branding, customer satisfaction with the airport experience can be significantly improved and airport net revenues can be tracked to show a direct relationship with increased customer satisfaction.

WHAT DOES EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE AND BRANDING MEAN FOR AIRPORTS?

Excellent customer service is the synergy created when an airport's ability to exceed its customers' needs and expectations consistently matches its customers' perception

that their needs and expectations are well met. This is particularly challenging in the airport environment where, although many are responsible for the delivery of services, the customer and other stakeholders often hold the airport operator accountable for the level of service provided airport-wide. Recognising that misdirected complaints are inevitable in any environment where it is often unclear exactly who is responsible for service delivery, airport managers can either be defensive and try to explain to customers and stakeholders all the reasons why excellent customer service is difficult to achieve, or they can incorporate customer-centricity at the top and through the core of how their airports are managed.

Starting from the top requires establishing a customer-driven vision for the airport and leveraging the relationship between excellent customer service and branding. While customer service is often described by the services, products and

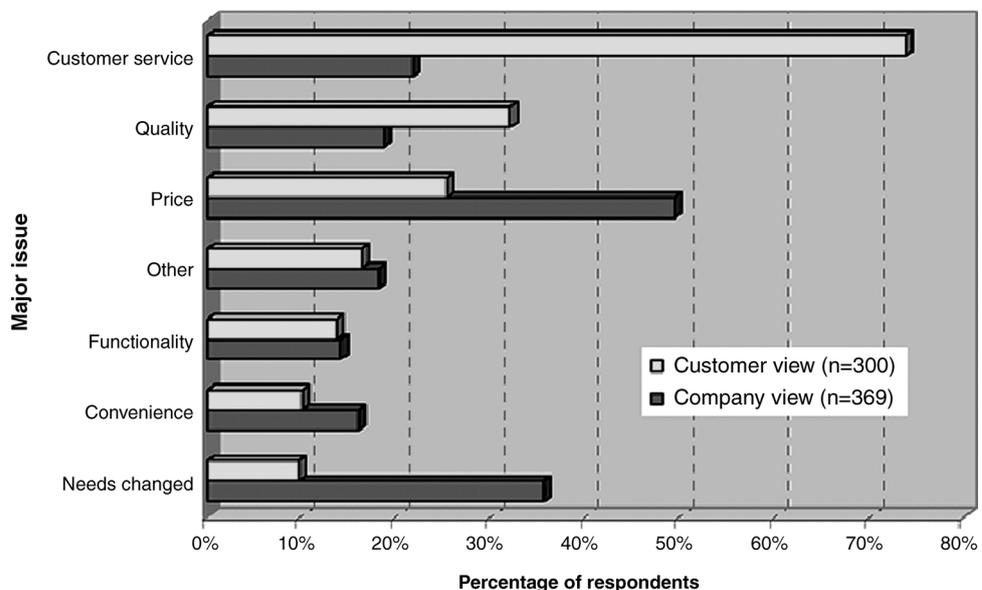


Figure 1 Why customers leave

experiences that an airport provides, airport brand is what customers and other stakeholders think about the airport and the services and products provided. That is, an airport's brand is the sum total of all the customer experiences at an airport, as perceived by the customer. Every airport has a brand, just as individuals have a personal brand — namely, the esteem in which they are held when people think about their names.

Airport brands can be either:

- *Ad hoc*: formed by the customers' perceptions of the typical experiences encountered there or by what they have heard or read about that airport. For example, most people have heard of or flown through John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. This airport has such a venerable history and reputation as America's gateway to the world that most people recognise it solely by its initials — JFK — initials which conjure up very specific airport images in people's minds. Some are nostalgic, some are stereotypical and associated with New York City's image, and others are based on millions and millions of customers' personal travel experiences at JFK over the years. Taken as a whole, these images have become JFK's *ad-hoc* brand.
- *Strategic*: defined and managed by the airport operator in collaboration with its stakeholders, business partners and airport employees, this represents an airport's promise to its customers. Singapore Changi Airport is renowned for its successful strategic airport brand. Changi Airport's management clearly understands the power and the value of their brand, as everything it says or does is consistent with the brand. For example, by visiting www.experiencechangi.com and exploring Brand

Changi, one can find brand definition statements such as:

- 'It's not just about flights at Changi Airport — the World's Best Airport. Take time to experience the wide range of facilities and services here. Enjoy the experience but just don't miss your flights!'
- 'Recreation and relaxation go hand in hand at Changi Airport. Enjoy a rejuvenating massage or chill by the poolside at our swimming pool.'
- 'Be spoiled for choice when deciding what to do at Changi Airport. Catch a movie, play Xbox games or be entertained by cable television unfolding on plasma and LCD screens.'
- 'Be enchanted by our various themed gardens ranging from tranquil indoor ponds to outdoor sunny gardens.'
- 'You say it's great at Changi. The simple truth — Changi is both your journey and destination.'

Furthermore, by clicking on Brand Changi, various brand promises flash across the screen:

- 'Indulge in the excitement'
- 'Embrace the extravagance'
- 'Be fascinated by the finer pleasures'
- 'Enjoy the Changi Experience'
- 'How would you like to feel today? Thrilled, pampered, loved, enchanted, touched'.

Singapore Changi Airport has won over 250 awards. Its customers and stakeholders recognise that it is keeping its promise.

Airports that are recognised to be among the best in the world generally fall into the strategic brand category. It is recognised that an airport's logo, tagline and advertising are not the airport's brand but rather should be representations of the brand. In fact, the airport's brand exists in the minds of its customers and is reflected in the thoughts that arise when customers think about a particular airport.

CAN MORE 'TYPICAL' AIRPORTS REALLY ESTABLISH A UNIQUE BRAND?

Yes, they can — indeed, by so doing they would no longer be considered 'typical'.

If an airport is to be considered one of the best in the world by its customers, its management needs to be intrinsically focused on defining and managing the airport's unique brand, as well as providing outstanding customer experiences. In this regard, an airport's vision and its brand are two sides of the same coin. Both require that airport management strategically defines what the airport stands for, what guarantees it will provide to its customers, and how the experiences at the airport are positively differentiated from other airports.

All airports are in the same business, but some see themselves as comparable with a public utility which they believe defies branding. This is why customers at these airports often find it difficult to discern the city in which their destination airport is located as these airports look like any other. By way of contrast, both IBM and Apple sell personal computers, but Apple's customers believe Apple's brand stands for thinking 'outside of the box', ergo Apple's tagline, 'Think Different', versus IBM's (Big Blue) traditional brand promise as a single source supplier for all computing needs. Because of these perceptions, customers of Apple and IBM are very brand loyal.

Both Apple and IBM understand the economic value of their brands and the resulting revenue impact that branded customer experiences provide. Similarly, excellent customer service, unique customer experiences and an effective branding strategy have a positive impact on airports' financial performance and image.

Customers perceive the travel experience as a continuum. At its best, an excellent airport experience is safe, secure, seamless, on time, efficient, hassle-free, pleasant and pleasing. Airports can provide excellent airport experiences and still differentiate themselves from other airports by pleasing their customers with unique experiences not found at every other airport, and assuring consistent basic services that are as good as, or preferably better than, the best rated airports. In addition to Singapore Changi Airport, the airports that are repeatedly recognised as 'the best' by their customers, and reported by benchmarking surveys such as the ACI Airport Service Quality Program and Skytrax, include Seoul Incheon International Airport, Hong Kong International Airport, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Amsterdam Schiphol Airport and Vancouver International Airport. Each of these airports offers unique customer experiences and provides consistent quality, basic services that satisfy customer priorities as well as their needs and expectations. Equally important, their customers' perceptions resonate with the airport's brand.

HOW SHOULD AIRPORT MANAGERS CREATE POSITIVE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES AND DEFINE A UNIQUE BRAND?

Managers should begin by asking — asking customers, stakeholders who affect

or can be affected by the airport, airlines, tenants, other business partners and, just as importantly, airport employees — about the services provided at the airport, about their wants, needs and expectations, about their opinions, perceptions and their level of satisfaction. This information provides a baseline from which to begin.

Airport Management 101 dictates that all airports must first and foremost be safe and secure. But beyond safety and security, it is critical to understand what drives customer satisfaction and perception at the airport. Some drivers of customer satisfaction will be the same between benchmarked airports but others will be quite different. Market research is key as it provides the critical intelligence needed to map out a strategic direction, a unique brand, and assure that the airport stays on track. While vision and brand identify the airport as top management want it to be, standards, policies, procedures and systems are at the core of how the vision is to be achieved and the brand's promise realised.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF AIRPORT STANDARDS IN PROVIDING EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE?

Once the airport's brand has been defined and customer priorities have been determined using appropriate market research methodologies, airport standards which support the brand and address the drivers of customer satisfaction should be established. It is important that they are developed in collaboration with the airport community and subsequently published and shared with all who will be affected, including airport employees and even customers. As customers expect seamless and transparent airport experiences and judge airports on the collective performance of the entire airport community, published customer service standards

facilitate the delivery of consistently excellent service by providing generally accepted guidelines for all service providers at the airport.

Airport operators are uniquely positioned to spearhead the adoption of customer service standards for their airport. They are like the conductor of a symphony orchestra. Without a musical score, music quickly becomes cacophony. Published airport standards are an airport's score and are an important tool for communicating the airport's brand to business partners, stakeholders, airport employees and customers. Airport standards assure a consistent and reliable level of performance, guide customer communications and marketing campaigns, and manage customer expectations. They often include guidelines for facility condition and cleanliness; operational efficiency; employee behaviour, appearance and knowledge; signage; airport and terminal planning and design; concessions; and minimising construction impact on customers.

HOW CAN AIRPORTS 'STAY ON BRAND'?

There are a number of techniques to 'stay on brand':

- *Periodic review of airport policies, procedures and systems to enable excellent customer service:* Policies, procedures and systems provide an organisation with the assurance that business is being conducted in a manner that advances the attainment of its vision, the fulfilment of its mission and, therefore, the realisation of its brand. As airports become customer-centric and focused on enhancing customer experiences, they often find that they are saddled with policies, procedures and systems from a prior era, which are obstacles to providing

excellent customer service. In fact, they sometimes assure abominable service by their very design. A review of these fundamental management tools, both from a customer perspective (utilising a review of complaints as well as focus groups, for example) and for consistency with the brand strategy, is critical for airports to provide excellent customer service.

- *A performance management system to measure the airport operator's performance and that of the entire airport community to keep the airport on track:* Performance management is critical to assure that the airport is delivering on its promise to its customers, and therefore staying on brand. It involves monitoring and managing the airport's collective performance utilising published airport standards and identifying key performance measures that indicate that the airport is moving in the right direction. Characteristics of a sound performance management programme include baseline measures; a 'critical few' realistic 'stretch targets' that address customer priorities; reliable feedback systems for all customers; scorecards that clearly communicate 'performance at a glance' for each service provider; action plans that identify what will be done by whom and in what timeframe to improve key performance indicators; incentives to improve performance; as well as initiatives to energise and engage airport employees. Without a formal and effective market research programme, it is difficult to know the right things to do to improve customer satisfaction and airport image, and achieve the concomitant increased revenues possible as a result. Without a formal and effective performance management system, it is difficult to know if these things are being done right.

Many have heard the performance management mantra that what gets measured gets done. Therefore, it is extremely important that the right things get measured. One banking institution learned this lesson the hard way. It had determined that increased personalisation of teller and customer interactions was a key driver of customer satisfaction. Although tellers were informed of this new customer service initiative, standards were defined and training provided, customer satisfaction lagged. Upon further scrutiny, it was discovered that the bank's performance management system rated employees on speed of transactions. This practice was counterproductive to enhancing people-to-people interactions and in fact damaged the customers' perception of the bank's performance.

- *Unique service programmes focused on customer priorities that also advance the airport's brand:* Customer service programmes provide facilities, products, services and amenities that fulfil customer needs and wants and resonate with the airport's brand. Branded service programmes respond to customer priorities in a way that differentiates the total experience at one airport from another. They can provide new or enhanced revenue streams for the airport as well as opportunities to improve customer satisfaction and airport image. Examples of branded service programmes include colour-coded signage and red-jacketed customer service representatives — two components of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Customer Care Program; the 'white hat welcome ceremony' by the 'White Hatters' volunteer group who meet passengers at their gate and present them with their very own hat at Canada's Calgary International Airport; the Dutch

masters on display from the famed Rijksmuseum, gaming tables at the Holland Casino, acclaimed duty-free shopping and wedding ceremonies at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport; or the spa, showers, pool, napping cubicles, airport movie theatre and sunflower garden with koi pond at Changi Airport.

An airport's brand definition encapsulates what it does, how it differs from other airports, and what it promises to deliver to those who interact with it or utilise its services. It is most effective when it is customer-centric, ie shaped by understanding customers' wants, needs, expectations and priorities, and by determining their satisfaction levels with, and perceptions of, the airport and the services provided. As opposed to the traditional hierarchical organisation, which is often depicted as a pyramid and focused on achieving internal goals and reporting to upper management, senior management and supervisors in a customer-centric organisation are all focused on supporting the front-line staff in delighting the customers who are at the core of the organisation (see Figure 2). The brand definition provides the roadmap for outlining a strategic customer service improvement and branding strategy that guides business decisions.



Figure 2 Customer-centric organisation

WHEN SHOULD AN AIRPORT RETOOL ITS LOGO AND/OR ITS TAGLINE?

Ideally, the airport should readdress its logo and tagline after it has reinvented itself by implementing a formal customer service improvement programme and branding strategy and obtaining tangible evidence that customer satisfaction levels, awareness and perceptions are moving in the right direction. Airports often work with their advertising agencies to develop a very clever logo and/or tagline without having done the necessary legwork to define the brand and ensure that customers are experiencing the brand promise. In effect, they may be making service delivery promises before they are ready to deliver. Consider the potential credibility liability of BMW's tagline, 'The ultimate driving machine', should BMW's vehicles repeatedly fail to outperform others in the same class.

HOW IMPORTANT IS EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT TO REALISING OUTSTANDING CUSTOMER SERVICES AND CREDIBLE BRANDING?

In his book, 'The Customer Comes Second', Hal Rosenbluth, CEO of the travel management company Rosenbluth International, testifies to the importance of focusing on employees first, as engaged employees will take care of customers.³ Here again the airport environment proves to be particularly problematic as most airport employees do not work for the same employer; indeed, they tend to work for many companies who often do not have a shared agenda for the airport. Customers are unlikely to experience excellent customer service that resonates with the airport's brand on a consistent basis unless the airport's employers and employees are on board and positioned to deliver.

As a result, airports are adopting customer service standards that outline the knowledge, professionalism and courteous behaviour expected of *all* airport employees, regardless of their job function or employer of record. These standards form the basis of airport customer service training programmes, airport orientation programmes, performance management tools such as mystery shopping, and employee/employer reward and recognition programmes. They are being included in airport leases, permits and contracts, to establish performance-level guidelines for new or renewed business relationships. Many airport employers are also reviewing their hiring practices and employee performance management systems to ensure that employees who exemplify the service standards and provide outstanding customer service are identified and rewarded.

Additionally, effective and regular employee communications ensure that airport employees are the first to know about upcoming events, operational changes and capital construction, so that they not only feel that they are valued members of the airport family but they, in turn, can better anticipate customer needs, answer customer questions and participate in promoting the airport's image.

HOW CAN AIRPORTS OBTAIN AIRPORT COMMUNITY BUY-IN TO PROVIDE EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE?

Involving the airport community every step of the way and obtaining their buy-in is another key strategy for airports focused on providing consistently excellent customer service. One technique that airports successfully utilise to facilitate buy-in is airport councils. Airport councils

provide a forum for participants including the airport operator, airlines, terminal operators, service contractors, concessionaires, and governmental agencies, including customs and immigration and the like, to develop a shared agenda, adopt service standards, solve common problems, manage and benchmark performance, develop cooperative marketing and communications programmes, and implement community programmes to elevate customer satisfaction, increase employee morale and increase net revenues. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Customer Care Program is one example of a robust customer service improvement programme which includes standards and performance management, as well as forums for the airport community to meet on a regular basis to improve customer satisfaction.

SUMMARY

Customers judge an airport's performance on the collective performance of all the airport partners which provide service. Simply stated:

$$\text{customer satisfaction} = \text{airport performance} - \text{customer expectations}$$

Therefore, to achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction, airports should ratchet up airport performance while managing customer expectations regarding service delivery. As performance exceeds expectations, customer satisfaction increases.

This is easier said than done when every aspect of an airport's business has repercussions on the service provided to its customers, which is then personified by the face-to-face customer interactions with airport employees. This is further complicated by the fact that, at the same time that airport managers are focused on

improving service delivery, customers' expectations are subject to change based on their experiences at other airports or with comparable industries such as upscale malls and restaurants. Given these challenges, success is by no means serendipitous. However, airport managers who strategically weave customer-centricity into the fabric of how business is done at their airports, and who are focused on achieving the buy-in of business partners, stakeholders and airport employees by using this iterative, holistic and programmatic approach, will enjoy more delighted customers, a more positive

airport image and a beneficial impact on the bottom line.

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