



SERVICE

The wow factor

Joanne Paternoster takes a closer look at the sustainability enhancing customer service efforts of a handful of gateways.

With today's passengers having more choice than ever before in terms of where to fly from, the provision of good customer service levels has arguably never been more important for airports.

It is also safe to say that assuring a high rating on all drivers of customer satisfaction is very challenging for airport operators given the many service providers responsible for the air travel service delivery chain.

However, as many surveys reveal each year and ACI knows only too well from its own customer satisfaction analysis, there are many airports out there that have made raising customer satisfaction levels a priority.

And some have even made it a prime objective to tackle the challenges confronting the consistency of service excellence at their airports.

Indeed, there are many customer service champions implementing service innovations, amenities, and programmes to address customer priorities and 'wow' visitors. Let me highlight the innovative work of just four of these progressive customer centric airport operators.

Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport (MSP)

The Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) has been in the forefront championing quality services for travellers at Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport for over a decade.

In fact, since 1998 the MAC has involved airlines, screeners, personal service providers and airport food and retail concessionaires in the Customer Service Action Council (CSAC), which measures customer feedback, identifies areas in need of improvement, and seeks cross-organisational improvement approaches.

"When there is a customer service issue, it's everybody's issue. The challenge is to work together as an airport community to address the issue and ensure customers have a great experience every time they fly from our airport," says Tim Anderson, the gateway's deputy executive director for operations.

Its latest innovation is the launch of a digital concierge programme, which is set to be introduced this autumn.

New, interactive, touch screen terminal directories will help passengers identify flight status, gate information, restaurants and shopping opportunities, locations of airport amenities and how many minutes it will take to get from the directory to travellers' selected points of interest.

A 'Map It' feature will show users graphically how to get from point-to-point. Travellers can also use the kiosks to provide direct feedback regarding their airport experience.

In 2011, MAC plans to add features that enable passengers to enter their interests into the digital concierge in order to receive a personalised menu of shops, services and restaurants likely to appeal to them, along with any associated sales or specials they will find there.

In addition, MAC is currently in the process of developing MyMSPconnect, a web portal designed to enhance the sense of community and commitment to service among airport businesses. Scheduled to launch by year's end, the new website will encourage information sharing among businesses operating at MSP.

With some 20,000 airport workers spread among dozens of companies, getting information to workers at all levels is challenging. Most employees have some web access, so the new portal is an opportunity to engage frontline workers as well as managers in building a customer-focused airport community.

MAC also is developing a customer service video that airport businesses can use in their employee orientation processes. The video highlights the airport community's employee brand promise to be "MSP Nice: one experience at a time".

Along with MyMSPconnect, an airport wide electronic newsletter, an airport-wide Employee of the Year programme, and regular CSAC meetings, the video furthers the sense that while airport employees may work for different employers, they all have a shared purpose: to do what they can to ensure every customer has a good experience every time they fly from MSP.



Airports Company South Africa (ACSA)

Airports Company South Africa's strategy is to build both an efficient and customer focused business in line with its vision of being a world leading airport business.

ACSA's network of 10 airports – which include OR Tambo (Johannesburg), Cape Town and King Shaka (Durban) – play a dominant role in the South African aviation industry.

Working with its key industry partners, implementation of ACSA's customer-centric service strategy was commissioned by ACSA's visionary managing director, Monhla Hlahla in 2008 and spearheaded by the company's energetic customer care manager, Claudia Ramsden both of whom are passionate about creating outstanding airport experiences for their customers.

The essence of ACSA's customer service strategy highlights the importance of all airport employees providing uniquely South African hospitality that exemplifies the true essence of Ubuntu (African origin) while delivering a safe, secure and efficient end-to-end travelling experience.

Customer care behaviour training was developed and designed with the strategic approach in mind. The airport community was part of the process and five behaviour standards were adopted and communicated to the entire airport community.

Since the inception of the programme in April 2009, approximately 15,000 airport employees have attended motivational workshops and over 11,000 attended the five behaviour standards four-hour training sessions.

A rewards and recognition programme will launch in September 2010. A customer care communication platform was also implemented. The platform called, Viewing Deck, affords all ACSA airport customers an opportunity to communicate with the airport and receive seamless and personalised responses.

The Viewing Deck gives the customer service department a multi-functional and diverse view of the customer's end to end experience and includes the social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, as well as a mobi site.

To date, over 17,000 customers have made use of the platform and more than 270,000 customers have made use of the sms facility.

And ACSA's iHELP programme continues to play an active role in improving customer satisfaction. Over 100 iHELP customer service agents are deployed throughout the airports' terminals to assist passengers.

Recently up skilled in German, French, Italian and Spanish, the iHELP team is able to facilitate a seamless end to end experience for passengers as they welcome and converse in visitors' mother tongues.

Many compliments have been received to date from 'wowed' customers. ACSA has also capitalised on the iHELP logo to create a caring ambiance at its airports. iHELP posters welcome customers to sms feedback concerning ACSA restrooms, security and services. Feedback is transmitted to the Viewing Deck platform for a customer response and corrective action by the responsible service provider.

In taking a strategic and consolidated approach to customer service, system wide, ACSA has much to be proud of and its successful handling of the extra hundreds of thousands of travellers who descended on South Africa for the recent football World Cup finals bears testimony to this approach.

Boston Logan International Airport

While safety and security are always top priorities at the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), which operates Boston Logan, customer service is not far behind as dedicated public services staff tackle the needs of the thousands of travellers who pass through the airport each day.

At Logan's public information booths, public service representatives are on hand to assist customers with questions and concerns regarding ground transportation, airline services, concession inquiries, special needs and TTY services. They also provide interpreting and translating services for a variety of languages in the public areas of the terminal.

For assistance Logan's customers can visit an information booth or call 1-800-23-LOGAN which is the gateway's customer service hotline. Public services staff are also stationed strategically at departure queuing areas to

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offer customer service assistance throughout the terminal.

The gateway is also proud of its Logan Airport Medical Patient Assistance Programme. The partnership, between Massport and Boston Healthcare International – a consortium of the area’s leading hospitals – offers a prearranged personalised meet and greet service for those passengers who come to Boston for medical assistance.

Massport recently launched a brand-new website – massport.com – which features interactive maps and wayfinding, brings flight information onto the home page, and offers users a wealth of information about Boston Logan International Airport.

In addition to the interactive maps of each terminal, the new website features a GetUthere application, which provides information in 50 different languages about the different modes of ground transportation available at the airport. The choices range from the Logan Express bus and taxis to water shuttles.

And today, hundreds of thousands of travellers have discovered a great way to find their way around Logan by using the Airport Wayfinder on Massport’s website.

Those who click the ‘Find Your Way’ icon can access a series of 31 movies in five languages covering eight categories that include the airport roadway system, parking, terminal locations, and the international arrival process. ‘Driving to and from Logan’, to be released later this year, will depict real life terminal roadway footage and directions.

Brad Martin, Aviation Customer Service’s deputy director and his staff have led Massport’s efforts to develop the Wayfinder programme. Indeed, according to Brad, “customer service at Logan Airport starts before travellers ever reach the airport.”

Miami International Airport (MIA)

Like the airports already featured in this article, Miami International Airport is not new to wowing passengers. In fact, in 2007, MIA was the first airport to engage the Disney Institute to train all mid and top-level management employees as well as all of its frontline employees.

That was the beginning of a cultural shift at MIA led by MIA’s director, Jose Abreu, who has made customer service one of his top initiatives.

In 2009, MIA deployed bright, fun, eye-catching uniforms adapted from an original painting by Romero Britto, which was commissioned by the city’s tourism bureau.

This year Miami International Airport launched its newest customer service training initiative – ‘Miami Begins with MIA’. The initiative requiring all 35,000 employees employed at the airport to complete mandatory training on the principles of hospitality and customer service.

MIA’s newest training initiative is part of a \$6.2 billion expansion that includes new terminals and other infrastructure. “The gleaming new facilities are impressive,” says Dickie Davis, the airport’s director for terminal operations and customer service, but equally critical are efforts to boost service for air travellers.

The mandatory training is part of the renewal process for airport ID badges, which are required to work at the airport and expire every two years. The customer service training is in addition to security and other required training for airport employees.

The course takes an hour to complete, is taught on-site by instructors from The Center for Service Excellence at Miami-Dade College, and teaches airport employees the linkages between airport jobs and Miami’s tourist-driven economy.

And MIA’s efforts appear to be paying off as customer service scores among the airport’s departing passengers are once again on the rise this year. Not only does MIA have impressive new terminal facilities, but its ratings continue to improve.

Dickie sums up the importance of the attitude and behaviour of airport staff on the entire airport experience when she says, “People might walk through our new facilities and remark how beautiful they are, but what they’ll really remember is how they were treated.”

Kudos to the airport community at each of these gateways for recognising the importance of working together to achieve service excellence on a consistent basis.

They are wowing more and more customers each and every day. Where were you when you were last ‘wowed’ by an airport?

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About the author

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