

Airport Check-in: Fliers may get help

Updated 12/14/2009 8:52 AM |

By Roger Yu, USA TODAY

Airports want their workers to be a little nicer.

Recognizing travelers' escalating ire with domestic flying, several airports are beefing up training for employees who interact with customers. Among them: New York JFK, Los Angeles, Miami and Phoenix.

New customer-service training programs have a common theme — getting employees to actively listen to travelers' needs and be resourceful in finding solutions regardless of their formal job duties.

Training sessions are typically mandatory for those directly employed by the airport. But they're also being offered to airline agents, Transportation Security Administration checkpoint personnel and food/retail clerks in hopes of fostering an improved, coordinated service culture across various factions that work on site.

"Regardless of where they work, (airport workers) shouldn't say, 'I don't work in that area,' " says [Dickie Davis](#) of Miami International, which is rolling out a revised training program. "It may not be our fault, but it's our problem. If customers didn't like hot dogs at MIA, they don't say, 'I didn't like hot dogs at MIA.' They say, 'I don't like MIA.' "

JFKIAT, which operates New York JFK's Terminal 4, hired Fordham University's Human Resiliency Institute to train its employees. Through lectures and peer training, the program reinforces four principles: adaptability, engaging customers, optimism and being proactive, says Tom Murphy, director of the institute. About 500 airline agents, AirTrain employees and parking attendants at JFK's Terminal 4 have taken the course, followed by another 1,000 at New York LaGuardia and Newark Liberty.

The institute plans to expand its program to about "half a dozen" other airports by next May through a partnership with the Association of American Airport Executives. Training sessions at Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and Manchester, N.H., have started.

Since hiring the Disney Institute two years ago, Miami has trained about 400 employees, mostly traffic attendants, terminal operations and security personnel. But starting this month, anyone who wears a security badge must undergo its revised program — dubbed "Miami begins with MIA" — that was developed jointly with local tourism officials and Miami Dade College.

Its lessons include "the universality of smile," better awareness of the airport and the importance of tourism for the region's economy, Davis says. "The aviation world has turned upside down. We have to be innovative."

Last year, Phoenix Sky Harbor produced a training video that is mandatory viewing for its own employees. Its main lessons: Smile; stop what you're doing to pay attention to customers; maintain a positive attitude; be proactive; and escort customers, rather than simply giving directions, whenever possible.

The airport has "recommended" the video to airlines and other vendors, and "a handful of tenants have implemented it as part of their training," says spokeswoman Alisa Nakashima-Smith.

- Dog parks are proliferating at U.S. airports. Atlanta Hartsfield installed an off-leash dog park last month, featuring benches and bags for pet waste. The 1,000-square-foot facility is part of the ground transportation center on the western end of the main terminal.

Los Angeles International has added three "animal relief stations" near its terminals, bringing the total to five. The facilities are aimed at assisting travelers with disabilities who are accompanied by guide dogs, says Larry Rolon of Los Angeles World Airports. Rolon says revisions to the Air Carrier Access Act require service animal relief areas to be installed at all U.S. airports.

- Mexicana Airlines will introduce daily non-stop service between Washington Dulles and Cancun, Mexico, starting Tuesday. It will compete with US Airways and United Airlines on the route.

- Southern California rail officials are considering cutting Metrolink service — the region's metro system — to Burbank Bob Hope Airport by 28% to save money.

The proposal isn't sitting well with airport officials, who factored continuing rail service into plans to develop a \$120 million transportation center. The proposed facility, which will be connected to the Bob Hope Airport Train Station, is designed to be a hub for rental cars and shuttle buses.

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