



40 at a time, 35,000 Miami International Airport workers train to better help visitors

By Jacquelyn Weiner

At first glance, the 40 or so men and women sitting in school desks Monday at Miami International Airport customer service training seemed anything but uniform.

Two younger-looking women sat up straight toward the front of the Miami-Dade Aviation Department training room, looking polished in heels; handbags at their sides.

A spectacled, gray-haired man who could have been a professor leaned against the wall to the right.

And toward the back, a row of gruff men in neon-orange vests striped with reflective tape sat slightly slumped but attentive.

Despite coming from different fields — construction, cargo and more — all had one thing in common: as new hires at Miami International, they're now tourism-industry representatives.

This concept is the driver behind "Miami Begins with MIA," a joint initiative of the Miami-Dade Aviation Department, the Miami Beach Visitor and Convention Authority and the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau — which has contributed \$20,000 toward the program — to ramp up customer service at the airport.

The push for better service at Miami International, where most visitors get their first impressions of this tourism-driven area, began in 2007 when 400 frontline airport employees participated in customer service training with the Disney Institute.

Fast forward to 2010, and all new hires must undergo customer service training with a goal of reaching all 35,000 airport employees.

That includes anyone from construction workers and security screeners to the person working the counter at Nathan's Famous hot dogs, Dickie Davis, the county aviation department's director of terminal operations and customer service, said Monday morning in an interview before the customer service-training session.

The reasoning behind this far-reaching approach the airport has taken to service is simple, Ms. Davis said: travelers will associate a negative experience they had with the airport or Miami as a whole, even if the employee doesn't work directly for the airport.

"It's your problem at the end of the day," Ms. Davis said.

This point was reiterated during the training session by instructor John Lopategui, a program development leader at Miami Dade College Center for Service Excellence, which provides the airport's customer service training.

"Somebody comes up to you and sees a badge," Mr. Lopategui said while presenting a mock scenario to the trainees. "They don't know what department you are from — except that you are MIA."

Throughout his presentation, Mr. Lopategui emphasized that despite the attendees' different positions, all are tourism representatives by association.

One in five households in the Miami area earns its livelihood from tourism, he noted in a PowerPoint presentation.

And of all the tourists who filter into Miami, he said, 95% enter through Miami International.

"They're going to see you first and meet with you first," he said. "So you're the face of the whole city."

Mr. Lopategui spoke energetically, walking back and forth in front of the class and motioning to punctuate his points.

He kicked off with a colorful, flashy "Miami Begins with Me" film to the beat of fast-paced music.

The film highlighted the importance of tourism to Miami and featured positive, pro-Miami sound bites from such area notables as Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Barry Johnson and Coral Gables Mayor Don Slesnick.

Soon after, it was quiz time — but not the nerve-wracking kind.

One of the more surprising, but correct, responses came after Mr. Lopategui asked the trainees what customers want most.

A construction worker in a black T-shirt and jeans had the correct answer: a clean bathroom.

He had heard travelers discussing it at the airport, he said.

Mr. Lopategui rewarded his correct answer with enthusiasm, scooping up a reward T-shirt and throwing it at him.

The second and third things customers seek most are courtesy of personnel and easy check-in with the airlines, Mr. Lopategui said.

Throughout the 40-minute session, Mr. Lopategui shared tidbits on how best to treat customers and their concerns.

When asked a question: "For that moment, make them think that question is the most important thing for you."

And on not simply passing a problem to someone else: "If a question comes to you, try to help that person," he said. "Don't just send them on their way."

The training drew to a close with a touching segment as Mr. Lopategui shared stories of exemplary service by airport employees.

One involved an employee who seized an opportunity to help a stressed-out mother struggling with bags and a disabled child.

After hearing that the mother was about to miss her flight, the employee lifted her son for a piggyback ride and hustled the pair to their gate.

"She did the human thing to do," he said.

While the customer-service training was just one among a series of training segments for employees, even small lessons taken from the course like smiling, making eye contact and going out of their way to help are the things that leave a positive impression on visitors — and keep them coming back, Mr. Lopategui said:

"They're going to remember these kinds of things."

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