

Reaching Out

Customer Service At Forefront As Passenger Numbers Decline

By Carol Ward



Dallas/Fort Worth International is offering "comfort zones," complete with living room-style furniture, as part of its efforts to enhance customer service.

One week in mid-March, employees at **Dallas/Fort Worth International** (DFW) took to the terminals, shaking hands and saying thanks to passengers as part of the airport's Customer Appreciation Week.

"We take this week every year to make sure that our passengers hear directly how much we appreciate their business," says Joe Lopano, DFW's executive vice president of marketing and terminal management.

The designated week is just one of several customer service initiatives undertaken by DFW management and staff. It's been going on for a few years, but this year the airport decided to formalize it as one of several elements in an overall strategic effort focused on customer service. Another recent initiative involves the formation of "comfort zones"

throughout the airport, featuring lounge chairs and other cozy furniture.

"They're sort of sprouting up everywhere," Lopano says.

"We have a very motivated work force and they come up with these ideas for customer appreciation week or comfort zones," he continues. "It's really fun to watch it happen. We've said it's important and they've taken that to heart."

At **Miami International** (MIA), the roughly 300 staff members who are in direct contact with the public will be sporting new uniforms later this year. The camp shirt-style uniforms were inspired by a work of art by Miami pop artist Romero Britto.

"The idea is that you'll be able to see our staff," says Dickie Davis, division

director of terminal operations and customer service. "The look is really Miami – happening, lively. We're not going to look generic."

MIA is also expanding its customer service training. It was the first airport to work with the **Disney Institute** for customer service training, which included training for staff who deal with the public.

"This year, we're rolling out a program to do airportwide customer service training," says Davis. "That means customer service training for 35,000 people."

These efforts and many others around the country aren't in direct response to the economic downturn that is leaving airport terminals with less traffic than is desirable, but airport executives acknowledge that customer service is as important as ever.

"We've got to retain what we have," says Davis. "To some extent, passengers can go other places, and people can choose not to travel."

Cheryl Marcell, deputy director of marketing and public relations for the **Sacramento County Airport System**, says customer service has changed somewhat along with the economy.

"What we're finding is our volunteers are seeing a change in the types of demands placed on them," she says, noting that some travelers are choosing airports due to attractive airfare pricing rather than

proximity to their ultimate destination. "We're having to train in new and more expansive ways."

Excellent customer service can make a difference in whether people choose your airport, adds Jane Martin, customer relations manager for **Raleigh Durham International (RDU)**.

"We have a lot of people who choose RDU and are traveling significant distances from Virginia or the western part of the state or from South Carolina who come to Raleigh to fly," she says. "We're very aware of that and it's part of our customer service message. People do have options and we always want them to choose this option."

Like DFW, RDU hosts an annual customer appreciation week. Held each autumn, the Raleigh-Durham Airport Authority joins with the airport's shops, restaurants and airlines to thank customers for their support.

Upping The Ante?

Some airports and concessionaires may be looking to up the ante on customer service given the downturn in the economy. With fewer passengers, airports, retailers and food and beverage operators are all competing for a shrinking pool of

RIGHT: *Lise D'Andrea, president and CEO of Customer Service Experts Inc., says customer service should be on everyone's minds all of the time, not just when the economy is bad.*

FAR RIGHT: *Dickie Davis, division director of terminal operations and customer service at MIA, says there will be airportwide customer service training for 35,000 people.*



potential customers. But most say their commitment to customer service hasn't wavered, nor has it changed due to the current conditions.

That's how it should be, says Lise D'Andrea, president and CEO of **Customer Service Experts Inc.**

"Our philosophy is that service should be a first thought all the time, not just in tough times," she says. "Developing a culture and sustaining a culture through thick and thin, the good and the bad, is really what makes a successful company."

If companies don't already have a comprehensive customer service philosophy, reacting to the current economic downturn with new efforts will likely fall flat, maintains Jill Donnelly, vice president of customer

experience management for Customer Service Experts.

"When you talk about boosting customer service at this time, it's very difficult for organizations to do that with any real meaning," Donnelly says. "If you're going to be an organization that offers fantastic customer service, which means really caring truthfully for the customer from the beginning to the end of their experience, that's something that takes a really long time and can't be turned around in a couple of months. It starts from the very top of the organization and is ingrained within everything that organization does, from the way they build to the way they treat vendors to the way they treat others – it really is pervasive.

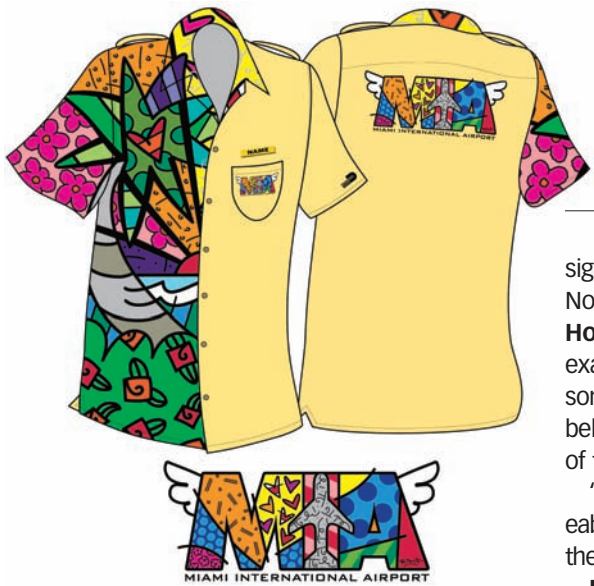
NEW CONCEPT
FROM **SAMUEL ADAMS**

INTRODUCING
SAMUEL ADAMS®
MEETINGHOUSE

MEETING THE NEEDS OF TODAY'S TRAVELER
AND DRIVING PROFITS
From the #1 craft brewer - Samuel Adams

CONTACT JEN LOCKMAN AT 617-368-5938
OR JEN.LOCKMAN@BOSTONBEER.COM
FOR DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

© 2009 THE BOSTON BEER COMPANY, BOSTON, MA



Miami International's public staff will be sporting new uniforms, inspired by Miami pop artist Romero Britto, later this year.

"A company, in tough times, realizes it can't sit on its laurels," Donnelly continues. "We can't just sprinkle fairy dust and walk away. They have a lot of hard work to do."

Sticking To Basics

Several of the major concessionaires operating in North American airports pride themselves on their comprehensive customer service. With the current downturn in traffic at most airports, they are cognizant that their businesses are in the spotlight more than ever.

"We're putting a stronger refocus on the basics of customer service," says Gary McBrayer, director of customer service for **Hudson Group**. That includes making sure every customer is greeted, asked, "Have you found everything you are looking for?" and been offered "upsell" items by staff.

"It's nothing new," says McBrayer, noting that Hudson is "beating the bushes at all of our locations" to maximize sales. Hudson Group stores are opening early and closing late to make sure all passengers have stores open at their convenience.

Delaware North Travel Companies Hospitality Services has a similar approach.

"The most important aspect is that we've learned we need to focus on the universal standards of great hospitality," says Stewart Collins, director of GuestPath for Delaware North.

The company is always looking for new strategies to underscore the company's

signature GuestPath program. At Delaware North's stores at **Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International** (FLL), for example, management decided to move some of its best employees out from behind the cash registers and to the front of the store.

"They're very well-trained, very knowledgeable," says Collins. "They act as hosts for the location and for the whole airport."

HDS Retail North America is reaching out directly to its international traveler base in key locations.

"We, probably more so than some of our competitors, tend to have a staff of broad cultural diversity," says Stuart Holcombe, executive vice president of business development. "We know that when people are traveling globally they feel more reassured when they walk into a store or restaurant or hotel and someone speaks their language.

"We're implementing a program where we're going to identify the various languages that each one of our team members speak in the store," Holcombe continues. Travelers who speak limited English might be able to find an associate

with whom they can communicate. "Maybe English isn't their best language, but rest assured there is somebody there who can speak French or Spanish or Chinese. Most likely, given the marketplace, we'll have somebody there. We've never really touted that before."

Many companies and airports are also using incentives to motivate their front line employees to provide excellent customer service.

"We've put forth several programs to incentivize and motivate our front-line people," says Gregg Paradies, president and CEO of **The Paradies Shops**. One of those programs is called the "Power of Three." "We are challenging each sales associate to sell a minimum of three items to each customer," he says. "We give them the tools – the tools being training as well as great sales promotions – then we measure it."

Another is the Paradies Stimulus Program, where a sales goal is set for each location. For every location that meets its sales goals, each employee there gets a \$50 bill.

But more than anything, Paradies says, customer service needs to be inherent in a company.

"The lifeblood and foundation of our company has always been our front-line people offering first-class service to the traveling public," he says. "That's always how we do business. It doesn't start with



Each year, the Raleigh-Durham Airport Authority joins with the airport's shops, restaurants and airlines to thank customers for their support as part of customer service week.

a downturn or a good turn.”

The focus on the basics is inherent in many airport customer service programs, as well. At RDU, established service standards, covering 11 areas of service, are updated every two years.

“It really talks about how you interact with the passenger, and against those standards we do our mystery shopping program,” says Martin.

MIA is rolling out a program called Concierge MIA, which Davis says is “a holistic look” at service at the airport.

“It’s everything from whether the bathrooms are clean to whether the employees are being nice,” she says.

Restrooms are often seen as a barometer for an airport’s commitment to customer satisfaction. They are a “hot spot” for all airports, Martin notes, but a new program has helped.

“We’ve seen marked improvement in the past year,” she says. “We have a new custodial vendor and we have incentives tied to their performance, based on mystery shopping, as well as customer feedback.”

DFW is renovating all of its restrooms except those in the new terminal D, Lopano says.

“We survey people every day in our

terminal,” he says. “What they’ve told us is that one of the most closely correlated elements to customer preference is cleanliness of the restrooms. We were cleaning our restrooms, that wasn’t the issue. If they’re old and don’t look good, then people think they’re not clean.”

Monitoring The Mood

A key element of customer service programs is monitoring progress and results through things like mystery shops, customer surveys and other methods. BAA, for example, uses a quality of service monitor to immediately detect any problems, says Mark Knight, president of BAA USA.

“Teams of researchers go out on a daily basis and intercept customers exiting stores to ask them about the experience,” says Knight. “We monitor that constantly and provide feedback to our tenants. We also have our whole team out there every day trying to pick off issues and help tenants with the myriad issues they run into that affect customer service. We’ve got our ears to the ground every day.”

Other operators and concessionaires have similar programs, many of which are of a “mystery shop” variety. Many also

provide methods for customer feedback, whether it be the traditional comment cards or more tech-forward solutions.

Airports take similar approaches, both through their concessionaires and on their own. At RDU, for example, Second Edition Booksellers gives out free bookmarks printed with the airport’s contact information. The airport itself has pre-recorded announcements in the terminals that invite customers to give feedback online, and also distributes thank you cards within concessions that also push feedback to the Web site, Martin says. RDU has a standard of responding within 48 hours, but about 95% receive a response within 24 hours.

“We really are appreciative when somebody lets us know when something didn’t go well,” says Martin. “It may not always be pleasant, but we really want to know. It gives us an opportunity to address the problem. If we don’t know about the experience, then we’re assuming everything is fine.”

We’d like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Carol Ward at carol@airportrevenue.com.

The advertisement features a central logo for 'FABER News - Gifts - Books - Cafes' with a star above the name. Below it is a 'Miami NEWS NOW' logo. Surrounding these are five photographs of retail stores: 'L'OCCITANE EN PROVENCE' (top left), a store with a 'TAXCO TRAVEL' sign (top right), a large multi-level retail store (center), a jewelry store named 'Diamond Jewels' (bottom left), and a 'BOSS' clothing store (bottom right). At the bottom of the ad, the text reads: 'FULFILLING THE NEEDS OF TRAVELERS FOR OVER 160 YEARS!' and 'For more information contact: Gary Lindstrom, Vice President of Development 201-330-1515 ext. 226 • glindstrom@faber-intl.com 550 Meadowlands Parkway Secaucus, NJ 07094'.