

Miami International Airport, Disney Institute – Jet Towards Success

In the mid-1980s, Jose Abreu arrived at the *Walt Disney World*® Resort with friends and relatives. His mission? Keep track of the tickets. His mistake? He lost them.

“I didn’t know where I lost them,” Abreu explained. “Somewhere between the van and the room, I think. It was just devastating! I lost *all* the tickets. It was a major investment and I was upset and everyone was in a panic. I didn’t know what to do.”

That was the bad news. The good news, of course, is that José Abreu was at the Walt Disney World Resort. Abreu found a Cast Member (employee) and explained his dilemma. After researching the situation and tracking down the details, she returned to Abreu who was amazed at the turn of events.

“She replaced our tickets!” he said, still impressed more than two decades later. “I couldn’t believe how easy the process was!”

As Abreu learned, *Disney does it right*. His vacation’s “tragic moment” was transformed into a “magic moment,” and José Abreu returned home refreshed and ready to focus on his job – which would eventually lead to the position of director of Miami International Airport (MIA) for the Miami-Dade County Aviation Department.

FIRST STEPS

Abreu’s Disney experience was unforgettable. It epitomized outstanding customer service - the caliber of customer service he wished to see implemented at MIA.

A coordinated five-point plan, covering a spectrum of needed improvements, was in the works at the airport. The plan focused on cost control, maximizing non-aeronautical revenues, re-assessing the airport business model to match its needs, promoting available capacity, and creating a passenger-friendly environment through improvements in customer service.

This last point was vital. Internal and external studies showed that MIA’s customer service standings needed improvement. Abreu noted the difficulty of getting 35,000 employees – comprised of a diverse mix of airline personnel, vendors, county employees, and federal employees -- on the same page. But with as many as 32 million passengers arriving and departing from a city-sized airport each year, he knew that introducing superior customer service was essential to the success of the airport.

“It was a matter of survival for us,” stated Abreu. “It was just that simple. And from my own experience, I believe that Disney knows better than anyone how you can become a world-class organization.”

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One of the first steps Abreu took in his mission to raise the bar was to appoint Division Director of Terminal Operations & Customer Service, Dickie Davis, as the “CEO” of this operation. While Davis was anxious to initiate a drive to increase morale and at the same time, enhance and improve customer service, she recognized certain challenges ahead.

“A customer tends to equate an airport with their airline experience,” she explained. “If they get bumped by an airline in Atlanta, they’ll say, ‘I’m never flying through Atlanta again!’ If O’Hare was snowed in, they won’t go back to Chicago even though Chicago didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“We can’t always do something about the airline,” she observed, “but as an airport, we can do some things to mitigate the circumstances.”

After some discussions, Abreu, Davis, and other MIA officials agreed that they would seek out the expertise of a company they knew had a proven reputation for exceptional customer service: Disney Institute.

THE MATRIX

Fueling the start of the transformation was *Disney Institute* facilitator Rob Morton, who landed at MIA in July 2007. In this initial one-day program, he delivered a presentation focused on quality service to the facility's senior leaders. Introducing unique concepts such as the Disney Approach and the "Chain of Excellence" model, Morton discussed how leadership excellence affects cast excellence, which, in turn, enhances guest satisfaction and then leads to business results.

The topics hit home. At this first session, Morton asked the group to explore ways that they could eliminate or, at least, *mitigate*, barriers to providing exceptional customer service. They were tasked with conceiving a shared purpose to create consistency among vendors.

Morton also introduced the Service Matrix, a business tool which made a resounding impact.

"The Service Matrix helps observe and identify service issues at a much greater level of detail," Morton explained. "At Walt Disney World this tool includes service delivery systems – our Cast, or human resources; the Setting, which is the physical or virtual environment; and the Process."

"A key message that came out of this first engagement," said Morton, "was the idea that 'It may not be our fault, but it is our problem.' The concept is that *everyone* is responsible and accountable for the passenger experience."

Within months, Abreu, Davis, and several other MIA officials traveled to the *Walt Disney World* Resort in Orlando to see firsthand how an operation of similar size conducts training and applies Disney strategies to aid in designing and delivering the Guest experience. MIA's training with *Disney Institute* received widespread coverage, appeared on 650 media outlets and generated feature stories on internet giants Yahoo.com and MSN.com.

Beyond the worldwide publicity, Davis found the Walt Disney World Resort experience invaluable.

"We recognized that, like us, Disney was running a complete city – a busy city – and we wanted to know 'How do they make it happen?'"

BACK AT HOME

Every element shared by *Disney Institute* would be vital – and challenging. Not only was Miami International Airport working to improve their level of service, but they were also doing it in the midst of a \$6.2 billion capital improvement program. They were determined to improve their intangibles while not only operating an airport, but building another one.

There were other hurdles as well. Nametags, a seemingly simple accessory, faced a continuity issue, since multiple entities, including airlines, vendors, and concessionaires, work within MIA. But challenges went beyond nametags. Individual store policies, company dress codes, and business philosophies needed to be evaluated to help MIA present a unified approach to customer service.

"All of the stores here are technically part of the 'we,'" explained Davis. "Our idea was getting companies to join forces with us and enhance our commitment to improving service. We may be driving the bus and setting the direction, but we are working with people to get a commitment."

With that in mind, MIA officials were anxious to craft practices that could work for everyone as they worked on tailoring the Disney protocols to fit MIA's needs. They anticipated that the course content and a newfound sense of camaraderie would be passed through the ranks.

Bringing employees up to speed was only half the battle. Numerous cultural differences of passengers elevated the challenge of airport customer service to an entirely different level.

"You can walk through the airport and see a passenger standing by the escalator and staring at it. That's when you realize they've never ridden an escalator before," said Davis. "They're afraid. We deal with various cultures, languages and expectations. Our job is to be alert, sensitive and caring."

"It's critical," she admitted. "We have this burning desire to be the best we can be."

GETTING STARTED

MIA was serious about making changes. They developed a holistic approach to customer service - a fifteen-point program called "Concierge MIA." The program embraces the principles that uniforms, training, service and physical environment all communicate quality. This program revamped many practices from how restrooms are cleaned to changing the way Aviation Department staff are uniformed.

The 400 front-line employees in security and operations will be wearing relaxed, distinctly colored shirts designed by the internationally renowned pop artist and Miami resident, Romero Britto. Says Davis, "When you have over 80,000 people a day coming through your doors, you need staff to be visible, and you want what they are wearing to communicate a sense of place. This is Miami, and our visitors expect a certain look. Our new uniforms will help us communicate the life and spirit that is uniquely Miami."

"Our terminal operators are trained to recognize body language--the pausing, hesitation, head scratching, etc.-- that tells them that someone is lost or needs help," said Davis.

In addition to the visible signs of change for passengers, Davis felt that the staff was responding to the well-publicized effort.

"I think this has had a powerful effect on everyone," reflects Davis. "It engendered a lot of *esprit de corps* and staff members could see that this was a serious initiative."

To further support the transition, Morton points out that MIA leadership learned to look for influencers among the front line teams to include in the process, and to consider how positive behaviors could be reinforced through recognition. Morton added that in the end, it is ultimately up to the leaders to model the right behaviors and set the example.

"They cannot expect employees to do anything they are not doing themselves," said Morton.

That was no problem for Abreu. He takes pleasure in practicing service standards he witnessed more than twenty years ago on his family vacation.

"At MIA, you'll see people from all levels, entry level staff and middle and upper management - including me - walking through the terminals and not hesitating to pick up paper from the floor. It's all a visible reminder to every employee that there is a sense of pride in serving our customers. We are constantly bringing the level of awareness to where it needs to be."

Davis added the tools she learned in the Disney's Approach to Quality Service program in solving passenger problems to her approach to customer service, recognizing that *everyone* can do something to improve the customer experience.

"A customer wrote us and was upset about a number of things," recalls Davis. "Significant things. So, I placed a call, and he was shocked that I personally called him back. "Wow," he said. "Thanks for calling. To be honest, I expected a form letter." Davis continues, "We don't do that. We take the time to look at each issue, fix what we can, and follow up with passengers, so they are clear that we're interested in what they have to say. Certainly, that's something Disney does well. They focus on the small details - the details that matter - and *that* makes a difference."

Davis pauses as she considers the progress MIA has made.

"Prior to our association with Disney, we were already focused on the details, but Disney helped us solder our resolve."

A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

With such a large workforce, it may take years for MIA to put into place all the changes they are striving for. But as far as Abreu, Davis, MIA's senior leaders, and *Disney Institute* facilitators are concerned, the flight plan has been filed and now the MIA team is soaring and on course. Both MIA and *Disney Institute* remain in contact to share ideas, benchmark goals, and ultimately realize Abreu's dream of committing to a corporate culture that revolves around customer service.

And the movement is growing. At last count, eighteen different stores and companies have sent representatives to *Disney Institute* programs, including the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. MIA climbed to an impressive sixth place in the 2008 J.D. Power & Associates North America Airport Satisfaction Study after being ranked 14th in overall satisfaction in 2007. It was the only large airport to show improvement. Also, MIA won several awards in the 2008 Airport Council International-North America Marketing & Communications Competition, including first place in Customer Service Initiatives for the Concierge MIA.

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While improvements have been overwhelmingly positive, Abreu isn't viewing things through rose-colored glasses. He knows there is a long journey ahead.

"There is still work to be done," Abreu says. "But we are moving the customer service bar. We have to. As we continue to move forward with our new philosophy and as we introduce new uniforms and programs

to assist our passengers, travelers will continue to see the change.

"And that's one of the reasons why we turned to Disney. I think that going to the best gives you the best results."