



[Service training can keep air travelers from flying away](#)

By Michael Lewis
Commentary

No sooner had we detailed Miami International Airport's new customer service training last week than a study proved why it's so vital. The day our Spring Travel section unveiled training of workers to enhance passenger experience, J.D. Power was ranking Miami International third from last in satisfaction among large North American airports.

More than 12,000 passengers rated satisfaction, accessibility, check-in and security. That's not precisely service, but since the airport is near the end of a \$7 billion upgrade, bad results reflect service more than structure.

Among big airports, we ranked 17th. We also fell a full notch lower than smaller Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood and far behind Tampa, which hit the top tier while we fell into the lowest.

Second highest among all sizes was Southwest Florida International. Miami International beat out only Newark and Los Angeles among big airports — and just barely.

The sorry rating should scare us because we're a destination, not a pass-through point. We applaud Detroit's top rating among huge airports, but it's hardly a tourism magnet. We depend on airports for 19 out of 20 overnight guests, some of whom might bypass Miami International or skip a Miami visit altogether.

Clearly, the Miami Begins with MIA program has a big job.

If there's good news, it's that Power surveyed all last year while our training just took off in December and has yet to show its wings. We started with new workers. We've yet to train the 35,000 now on the job.

But there's training and then there's training. Training content and how much the multiple employers at the airport stress service in practice will determine whether it's key to jetting ahead or merely window dressing.

Will what's taught translate to on-the-job service? Do airport workers get it?

Will they smile? Go the extra mile?

Will they listen? Are they empowered to act on what they hear?

Will they keep promises to hurried and worried guests?

Will they give good directions and valid advice, based on intimate knowledge of our large, confusing airport?

Will they speak the customer's language — not just native language, but the specialized language of air travelers, air shippers or arriving diplomats?

Can they add something extra? Trolleys now linking to distant Concourse D and meal vouchers for inconvenienced travelers are great starts.

Aviation Director José Abreu says an internal survey of departing passengers in the past year won us higher ratings. But Power results prove better ratings haven't done enough. Training should narrow the gap.

Note that in competing with large airports, Miami International is not battling giants of achievement. In general, smaller airports win higher ratings.

Further, airports as a class lag in customer ratings in the visitor industry. Hotels and even car rental firms fare far better.

Whether or not it's added security since 9/11 that causes the lower airport rankings, airports are businesses. The less they please us, the more we avoid them, perhaps driving the length of Florida instead of flying.

No, customer service is key, but not everything so labeled is true service. The Power study points out that high-tech bells and whistles are less central to service perceptions than are nuts-and-bolts of comfort — things humans, not machines, do best.

Not everyone gets it. Two days preceding the Power report the Miami Herald printed a half-page ad touting "Customer Service at Your Fingertips."

But this brand of "service" tells you to "Press 1 to report a missing... newspaper, Press 2 to stop your newspaper... Press 3 to..." well, you get the idea — automated hoops that make the user do the work. So-called service that eliminates human beings frustrates customers.

It's the personal touch, not the telephone touch or the computer touch, that offers real service. People provide service, automation adds frustration.

We all recognize good service, just as we all recognize bad. If you haven't stood in line in the past three months waiting while clerks talk with each other rather than customers, thank your lucky stars that you haven't visited a supermarket, drug store, post office or government agency.

Just as we recognize good or bad service, we remember it. We tell rudeness horror stories, just as we honor the woman who walks lost pedestrians a mile out of her way to their destination, then walks back again.

Because we live here, we all want good service. It elevates the quality of life.

But there's also income.

The Power survey notes that dissatisfied passengers averaged \$14.12 spending in airport visits, but those delighted with services averaged \$20.55 — 45% more.

If satisfaction everywhere begets higher spending, as it should, those who render poor service leave 45% of income on the table. Miami cannot afford that giveaway.

That's why the airport's innovative service training is so vital — and so important to emulate. We can't afford not to.

<http://www.miamitodaynews.com/news/100225/story-viewpoint.shtml>