

How customer experience takes flight at the Orlando airport

February 2017

Is it possible to have a good customer experience in an airport? Domingo Sanchez, a board member of the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority, explains an effort by the Authority's CEO and board to do just that.

Ask any consumer where he or she finds a good customer experience, and the answer isn't likely to include airports—but that doesn't have to be the case. In these short videos, Domingo Sanchez, a board member of the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority, explains how an effort by the Authority's CEO and board to focus one of the US's busiest airports on strengthened customer service can bring airport staff together and improve business in one of the toughest customer environments. This interview was conducted by McKinsey's Ron Ritter, and an edited transcript of the individual video chapters follows.

Logical

Airports don't usually focus on customer service—but in my mind, it was the only focus. I'd talked to our executive team about what airports really do. What I discovered was that most of them focus on structurally getting people in and out of the airport, which is the function of an airport. We're not a retail center. We don't sell hats and umbrellas, we don't sell food, and we don't park cars—that's not what we do. We're there as a hub to move people in and out. So the only thing that we could improve upon was the customer experience. The way I explained it to them, when they asked "Why is this important to you," was that the only thing we do is figure out how to make people feel better about being in the airport.

We're the vacation capital of the world. What I recognized was that all of our stakeholders throughout Orlando were engaged in these customer-service initiatives. Why shouldn't the gateway to Orlando, which is the Orlando airport that pushes 43 million passengers through Orlando every year, be focused on this? So we had to figure that whole thing out.

For me it wasn't an epiphany on why it was important to have customer service, it was just logical. How can I as a board member create big impact for our passengers and for our employees? And so this was the initiative they decided to pick up on.

Now boarding

So how did I get everybody on board with this initiative? It was a challenge. We had to figure out how to get everybody engaged, not only from a community standpoint but also from a political standpoint. And so, frankly, I spent a lot of time meeting with stakeholders and talking to our leadership, getting them to understand why this was important—not just for our current operation at the airport but also for the south terminal, which is a big project.

The south terminal is a \$2 billion expansion. We're adding 16 new gates and a new intermodal station. We're going to have light rail from Miami to Orlando, direct. So what I had to do, to prove to the board and the community that it was important, was two things.

Number one, we had to make the statement "It's important to do this because of the way people feel." That's number one. But we also had to make a strong business case on why this made sense for us to do. Why would we want to invest \$5 million [annually] in customer experience into the airport that's been in existence for the past 40 or 50 years?

I thought one of the funniest things that we found was the fact that people at the Orlando airport, the passengers, value clean bathrooms. They didn't focus on TSA wait times, they didn't focus on retail. What they wanted was to get off a plane and to have world-class, clean, nice bathrooms. So that was a funny thing that we went through.

Training was critical when it came to creating community and a culture to help drive customer experience. We focused on how to effectively train all 18,000 employees. We made it simple. We figured out that if we could get all 18,000 employees to do five simple things—whether it was looking people directly in the eye and smiling, picking up trash, or focusing on safety, for example—five simple things that we came up with started to create a culture change and a feel of the airport that was focused on customer service.

One of the things I discovered was that it would be easy to teach somebody to smile and be pleasant. But if your bags are two hours late coming off the airplane, it doesn't matter how big the smile, you aren't happy. And so we had to fix both of those elements.

So we had to look at it from an operational standpoint, and then from a people-interaction standpoint. What makes this process work, number one, obviously, is getting leadership to buy in. And we did things. We hired a customer-service director, which the airport had never had. We established a nice \$5 million budget to do only customer initiatives that were really important.

We provided the team with a lot of flexibility to reward our partners and our employees within the organization, to encourage the customer experience. So there are a number of different things that we did—and the list is quite long—to focus on customer engagement.

Being digital

Digital is probably certainly in the top three most important things to get right when it comes to customer experience. Early on, what we discovered was that we didn't have a lot of data

on our customers. And so we went through this initiative where we “Bluetoothed” the whole airport—there were these little Bluetooth pods everywhere.

What we were able to discover is a number of different things: where the customers are dwelling, where they are going, where they are hanging out, where they are headed to, and how long it takes them to get to certain destinations. From a digital standpoint, it gave us so much information. It was overwhelming, the tools that we were able to produce because of that information.

What we discovered with social media was that, as long as we respond to our passengers, it ends up being more of a positive experience. Before we weren’t even responding. We would get a critical comment or somebody would say something, and it would be radio silence. And so we’ve implemented a program where social media is on the forefront of everything that we do.


A long runway

I think what’s improving in customer service right now with airports is people are starting to notice. People are starting to be aware of what their experiences are, whether those experiences are inside the community or inside the airport. People are starting to take notice. I think that there’s a long runway, no pun intended, on the customer experience.

I think it’s going to continue to improve as we start to mature through this process. Because we’re still very young at it. The biggest hurdle is that it’s always changing. That’s probably the biggest challenge: that we have to think about it on a daily basis. We have to think about it from a strategy standpoint every three or four months.

What do we need to change? What do we need to improve? It’s an ever-evolving process. It’s almost like its own living organism. It’s not something that’s static, that you just do and you’re done. People that are industry leaders in airports, and executives—if I had to give them a little bit of advice, number one, work hard on getting buy-in from your leadership team, which can be a challenge sometimes.

But once you have it, don’t stop there. You have to create momentum. Customer service is cultural. If you have a small glimpse, just a small glimpse of that culture, then you need to capitalize on it and make sure that you get the train going down the rails. That’s number one.

Number two, take big steps initially. Hire the customer-service director. Give them a robust budget. Show them that this is not only important to the customer but that it’s also personally important to you. And be a driver for the initiative. 

Domingo Sanchez is a member of the board of the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority.
Ron Ritter is a partner in McKinsey’s Miami office.