



AIR CARE CAN BE A MORE POWERFUL DIFFERENTIATOR THAN AIR FARE



Airline travel can often be nightmarish for passengers

It is the last leg of your productive but hectic trip. You are sitting at your designated seat inside an aircraft, looking forward to getting back home in about three hours. Other passengers too are seated. As the aircraft pushes back, the cabin crew is checking seat positions, fastened seatbelts etc. And then the aircraft stops at the edge of the tarmac or runway. It is more than 30 minutes and nobody seems to have any clue about the cause of the delay or when you will be airborne. You sit there ruefully thinking that if the delay had happened before boarding, you could have had that cup of coffee you so badly need. Maybe something stronger, given how you feel. Or perhaps hesitating to go to the restroom as the seatbelt sign is still on, but do not know if there will be any movement soon.

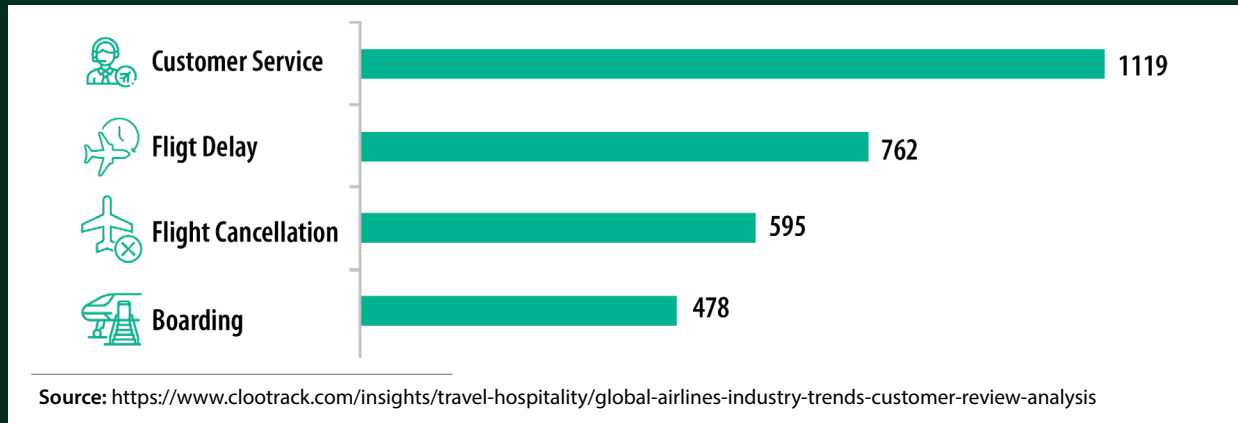
You recall the many times you have waited at designated gates to board the flight when the dreaded “DELAYED” sign appears on the Flight Information Display screens. All you can get from the airline staff is “We will inform you when we get updates, sir”. If you are

feeling particularly empathetic, you notice how harried the staff looks and you feel sorry for them. After all, if they do not have any information, what can they tell passengers, you tell yourself.

Missing connecting flights, or getting to know that your bag has not transferred over, or getting separated with your family during a severe flight disruption as the airlines try to ferry you back to your destination. These are all situations that are sometimes unavoidable and where airlines and passenger’s emotional connection is most vulnerable.

Most of us have experienced the above and many other air travel scenarios that have caused frustration, anger, despair- and at times, outbursts of strong displeasure on social media, followed by instructions to your travel team to “never ever book me by so and so airline”.

Clootrack’s feedback survey (conducted on almost 27500 passengers of 12 global airlines during Jan 2022- Jan 2023) revealed that customers were most concerned about the following five factors:



The J.D. Power 2024 North America Airline satisfaction study of 9500+ passengers who had flown a major North American airline during March 2023-2024 found that “ease of travel” and “trust” were the two biggest drivers of customer satisfaction.

(source: <https://www.livenowfox.com/news/top-airlines-north-america-2024-passenger-survey-least-favorite>).

Delays and disruptions often occur due to factors that are not directly under an airline’s control. Bad weather is a common example. On code-share flights, the partner responsible for marketing and selling tickets may not have control over technical snags caused in the operating partner’s aircraft. However, these factors too can erode customer trust and adversely affect ease of travel.

What can airlines do to reduce the pain of disruptions?

Airlines cannot prevent all events that cause disruptions.

(<https://www.infosys.com/industries/travel-hospitality/documents/disruption-travel-industry.pdf>)

) But they can certainly proactively take some actions to reduce the negative impact on passengers. The ability to take ameliorative actions requires a blend of attitude and behavioural skills backed by technological capabilities.

Not every disruption is equally severe. But some passengers may be

flying for the first time or may not have faced such situations before, so they do not know what to expect. Therefore, crew members and ground staff must be equipped to take proactive actions aimed at keeping passengers safe and comfortable and giving them the opportunity to make suitable choices for themselves. They also need to manage passengers with special needs such as wheelchair assistance (which may be a service outsourced by the airport operator). Some staff also share responsibility for ensuring compliance with flight operation protocols. Airline staff must be adequately empowered with information and tools so that they do not make inappropriate trade-offs due to resource limitations.

Staff training

Staff must act with empathy and display compassion and care, so that they can reassure passengers. Different passengers will need different levels of assurance and information or actions, so staff must be able to make on-the-fly assessment of priorities and needs and accordingly direct personalized attention. Frontline staff at the airport or inside the flight are the face of the airline visible to passengers, so they may need training the most. Crew members will sometimes need to improvise, and such approaches must be documented so that others can learn from them. The bottom line: train, enable, and encourage staff to be problem solvers and decision-makers and not just service delivery agents.

Communication

In situations related to flight disruptions, passengers generally resent the lack of information and the consequent sense of disempowerment. Depending on the situation, different communication channels and messages need to be activated. If passengers are inside the aircraft, announcements by the pilot or cabin crew may be the first level of communication. Sometimes, delays may occur before boarding or flights may be cancelled altogether. In such cases, messages will need to be sent to the passengers' registered mobile numbers and email ids. What if someone else has booked tickets on behalf of a passenger and the messages go to them and not to the actual traveller? If airline staff can identify such passengers, a call from the customer care team can make a big difference.

We have all seen hassled passengers crowd around airline desks at airports to get information about delays. Some may wish to cancel their flights, while others may be open to being rebooked on a different flight. What if airlines digitally communicate options to staff and ask them to assemble in different areas based on their choices? I believe this can reduce crowding, chaos levels and convey to passengers that the airline is indeed trying to help them get to their destination at the earliest.

Better integration of technologies

Airlines use a wide range of digital applications for various processes such as marketing, booking, ordering ancillaries such as food and beverages, selecting specific seats, check-in etc. Airports too use digital tools to identify passengers to allow them

access into the terminal, self-service baggage check-in, curbside baggage handling etc. As both airports and airlines shape customer experience, better integration between their systems can help the ecosystem win the trust of passengers and deliver superior service even during instances of disruption.

Contact Center Enablement to Anticipate and Act around the Moment of Care

Digital coupons as compensation: When its flights are delayed, United Airlines, under its "In the moment care" program, emails impacted passengers (above 21 years of age) personalized coupons with QR codes that they can redeem in-flight for beer. These are different from the coupons given for use at airport restaurants. Airlines can explore more inclusive variants, such as tie-ups with a range of F&B vendors at the origin/destination airports. Or since many airlines are already ecosystem partners with payment fintechs, they can add cash to passengers' digital wallets as a gesture to compensate for the inconvenience caused.

Local transport at destinations: For passengers traveling to a new city, local transport from the airport may be a challenge. As part of ecosystems, airlines can routinely offer paid cab services to passengers. During delays and disruptions, they can consider providing discounted cab services from the airport- another gesture that demonstrates care for customers.

Personalization: Airlines can install scanners at the aircraft door that read passenger names and seat numbers. Cabin crew can greet passengers by name and guide them to their seat. If a passenger has ordered a special meal or other ancillary services, the crew can assure them at the time of boarding that it will be provided. Based on data gathered from previous flights or preferences expressed during ticket booking or elsewhere, passengers on long haul flights can be offered personalized entertainment and in-flight shopping options. Some of these are simpler to implement than others; but all of them will foster customer loyalty towards the airline brand.

That personalization during delays can be a quick win for airlines may be seen from these data points: 76% of customers expect personalisation, and more than 87% of Americans expressed readiness to have various details of their activity monitored in exchange for more personalised rewards and communications. (source: <https://www.hubtype.com/blog/ways-to-improve-airline-customer-service>)

Extending gate close times: Sometimes, passengers are delayed by unusually high traffic to the airport or longer security check lines. Airline agents do attempt to prioritize passengers who are stuck inside the airport, but sometimes, their efforts fail.

To help such passengers, United Airlines came up with ConnectionSaver, “an analytics-driven engine that assesses arriving connections, calculates a customer’s distance from the gate, looks at all other passenger itineraries, where the plane is going, and whether the winds will allow the flight to make up time, and then makes a real-time determination about waiting for the connecting passenger”. If it is possible for agents to delay the flight, they do so. The ConnectionSaver app communicates this information directly with the customer, encouraging him/her to speed up. The few minutes of delay in take-off may well be a life-saver for some passengers without impacting the flight’s arrival time at its destination. This is another example of United Airline’s “In the moment care”. (source: <https://www.cio.com/article/419642/united-airlines-gives-employees-the-digital-tools-to-make-customers-happy.html>).

Improved recovery of lost baggage: Events like misplaced baggage impact individual passengers and not everyone booked by a flight. Doubling down on the recovery process and assigning a specific staff member who takes responsibility for tracing the

missing pieces and delivering them to the passenger can be another example of how airlines can demonstrate elevated levels of passenger care. This will need integration with relevant ground staff agencies at each airport, as well as other airlines that can carry the baggage to the destination by the earliest available flight. Technology can help automate this process and make it more efficient and seamless.

Flexible cabin configurations: Airlines can ask manufacturers for aircraft with some modular seating arrangements. If there are enough vacant seats on a flight and children or elderly passengers need to sleep, crew must be empowered to reallocate seats and configure the free seats into a surface that is more conducive to sleeping.

More loyalty rewards: Perhaps one of the easiest ways in which airlines can try to compensate passengers for delays and other inconveniences is to increase the number of loyalty reward points that are credited. This also increases the chances of passengers staying loyal. The loyalty management system can be integrated with flight operations systems so that extra reward points are automatically credited based on a scale- the more the delay or inconvenience caused, the greater the number of points (subject to caps).

Exceptions make the rule

Airlines have traditionally designed their systems and processes to cater to the standard workflow. Any kind of disruption is an exception. Earlier, the role of airlines would begin with passengers checking in at the airport counter. Nowadays, with anywhere, anytime check in possible digitally, airlines’ responsibility for passenger care also starts earlier. Airlines thus need to broaden their vision. While their investments in ways to manage disruptions is undoubtedly important, what often matters are the smaller actions taken by human staff in the early stages. Think of it as the “golden hour” after a cardiac emergency.

Conclusion

Airlines need to use technologies smartly to reduce the negative impact of flight delays and other inconveniences that passengers often face. But just as important is the human touch to reassure passengers that the airline has their back, and while it cannot give back the lost hours, it certainly will try and minimize the pain and stress associated with the disruptions.

More than 35 years ago, Jan Carlzon, the former CEO of Scandinavian Airlines, presciently encapsulated the need for airlines to empower frontline employees in the interest of customer delight. While technologies can enable this, the foundation will always be proactive employees committed to customer care and delight.

Here is a famous quote from Carlzon’s book, “Moments of Truth” that I believe are relevant to airlines (and other service companies) even today.

“Anyone who is not given information cannot assume responsibility. But anyone who is given information, cannot avoid assuming it. Once they understood our vision, our employees accepted responsibility enthusiastically, which sparked numerous simultaneous and energetic developments in the company.”

(Quotes sourced from <https://www.actionablebooks.com/summaries/moments-of-truth>)

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