



CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: *How you deal with the unexpected can have the most impact*

By Naras Eechambadi

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As companies attempt to become more customer focused, many have realized that CRM technology is only a foundation, not an end in itself. Recently, a great deal has been written on the topic of “managing,” hopefully with a view to improving, the customer experience.

The welcome focus on enhancing the customer experience recognizes that brand perception and value, particularly in service industries, is determined primarily not by advertising, public relations or other traditional marketing vehicles but by how good your customer feels during and after the time they do business with your company.

A good experience not only makes them come back but research shows that customers will rave about great experiences. That kind of word of mouth influence can be invaluable. It cannot be purchased with any amount of advertising or slick PR.

When thinking about the customer experience most companies focus on the routine processes that customers have to go through when they use a product or service. That is certainly a great place to start. The key to a truly delightful experience, however, can often be how well the company handles a situation when something goes wrong.

Companies sometimes rely on outstanding employees and accompanying heroics to set things right in these situations. However, it is critical that the right processes be in place to support all employees, including training on how to handle tough situations.

Let me illustrate with a recent experience I had. My son and I were traveling to India this past summer to visit family. We were traveling by Lufthansa and had to make two connections, one in Washington DC and the other in Frankfurt, Germany. The connections were not particularly tight, so I was not worried about our luggage.

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About an hour before we were to land in Chennai, the stewardess came to our seat and said “Sir, after you have cleared immigration in Chennai please go to the baggage information counter. There is some issue with your baggage and the Lufthansa rep there will give you additional details.” When we got down, we did just that.

A polite young lady at the counter asked for my name, checked her list and informed me that all four of our bags had not made it on the flight. However, she assured us that all four bags had been located in Frankfurt and would be put on the next available flight.

Having given me the necessary information, she asked me to wait briefly while she dealt with a few other passengers in similar situations, delegated the task of dealing with them to her colleagues and then she proceeded to ask me about our bags, their contents, filled out a bunch of forms and took me to the customs desk to have them stamped, so that our bags could be cleared when they came in without us having to come back to the airport.

Finally, without any prompting from me whatsoever, she gave me an envelope with a substantial amount of local cash as compensation for our temporary loss, so we could buy ourselves some clothes. Once I signed for the money, we were good to go. We got out of the airport before most people whose baggage had made it. Our baggage itself was delivered, as promised, the next day.


As a frequent traveler, I am no stranger to lost baggage. Thrice in the ‘80s, Air India lost my bags for no apparent reason, once each in London, Rome and Mumbai. Recovering the bags was a nightmare the first two times. The third time I never did get my bags. As for compensation, it took me six months and my dad pulling strings at the office of the chairman of Air India, before they grudgingly mailed me a check.

I was a penurious graduate student in those days and the money was meaningful. That was the last time I flew the national airline. Their loss, my gain. A few years back, British Airways managed to lose my baggage, also at Chennai Airport. After spending an hour staring at the bags on the belt in the wee hours of the morning, I finally gave up and went to their baggage counter.

The rep handed me a few forms, took them in and said “we will call you when the bags come in.” No talk of compensation or delivering them to the home. We got a call a few days later and were asked to come to the airport to pick up the bags and clear customs. While we were thankful to have our bags, it was not a pleasant experience.

What did Lufthansa do right in this case? Several things. First they had their information systems organized enough that they knew we had a problem even before we knew there was a problem. By communicating this to us in advance, they saved us the aggravation of waiting expectantly in the crowded baggage claim area, jostling other passengers for bags that would never arrive.

They told us what to do when we got down. When we went to the information counter, the rep knew exactly what she needed to do. She was obviously well trained in addition to



being professional and courteous. She did not waste her time apologizing for the lost bags. She just dealt with the problem at hand.

She surprised me on the positive side by providing compensation without being asked and by completing the paperwork and escorting me to the customs officer and making sure he signed off on the forms, instead of making me do the run around.

Airlines should, of course, spend time on making sure that routine customer service processes such as check in, boarding, disembarking, in-flight service are all as good as they can make it. As customers, we expect all this.

However, the true test of greatness in providing great customer service comes in making the customer feel good when things go wrong. That takes foresight, planning and training and getting information to the right people at the right time. It also takes good technology and the ability to leverage it appropriately. Finally, German efficiency helps, of course, even in India.

My only regret in this story is that Lufthansa is not a client of ours. Therefore, I cannot take any credit for its success in making me a loyal customer who has obviously become a raving fan, despite what started as a mistake on their part.

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