

Airline Passenger Safety or Customer Satisfaction?

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Abstract

A family arrived at the airline check-in counter expecting to be provided with a wheelchair, reserved in advance for an elderly family member recovering from recent surgery. During the check-in process, the desk agent asked the recovering family member for his medical travel certification, an airline regulation intended to ensure that travelers with medical conditions are healthy enough for air travel. As the required medical certification had not been obtained, the desk agent refused to issue a boarding pass. Understandably this caused the family to become quite upset, and they insisted that the family member was able to fly without the missing medical certification. Thus, the desk agent was faced with the dilemma of adhering to company policy, or accepting the family's assurances and issuing the boarding pass without the required medical certificate – placing the airline in legal jeopardy if the recovering patient were to face medical issues during the trip.

Key words: airline regulation; customer satisfaction; medical certificate; air travel safety

The Story

It was the second day of the 2014 Spring Festival holiday, the most important economic and social festival in China. Like many other families, the Chen family decided to celebrate the holiday with a family reunion. Upon beginning the check-in process for the family of seven at the Kunming, China airport, Mrs. Chen reminded the desk agent that a wheelchair had been requested for her elderly father, who was recovering from a recent leg surgery. The check-in agent replied that the wheelchair had indeed been reserved as requested, and all that was needed was the medical certificate signed by a physician stating the patient was healthy enough for air travel.

Mrs. Chen explained that she did not have time to obtain the medical certificate

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and that it really wasn't necessary as her father was fine – he just needed to “pamper” his leg while healing. The check-in agent explained that although she understood, it was airline company policy that passengers requiring special accommodations – such as wheelchair service – were required to submit a medical certificate in order to board the airplane. Undeterred, Mrs. Chen insisted that the wheelchair was requested for comfort typically afforded to the elderly, rather than a medical necessity. She further explained that her father's surgery had taken place nearly three months previously, and he could prove he was fit to fly by sitting, walking and standing unassisted. Mrs. Chen asked the airline agent to issue her father's boarding pass in consideration of the family's long-planned vacation. After all, had she known this would become an issue, she would not have bothered with the request and her elderly father would have been issued his boarding pass without the fuss they were now facing. The desk agent apologized but insisted that it was impossible to override the company's regulations. Understandably, all seven member of the family became angry and loudly vented their frustrations at being forced to cancel the trip or leaving a family member behind.

After being asked to step out of line so others could check in, the family discussed possible options. As boarding time approached, Mrs. Chen proposed a last ditch attempt to resolve the conflict. Recognizing that confrontation was not working, she politely asked if she could sign some sort of waiver, absolving the airline of liability, in lieu of a medical certificate. The airline employee rejected the proposal by maintaining that a personal letter was not an acceptable substitute. Having considered every option, Mrs. Chen concluded that the airline employee was being deliberately uncooperative and unreasonable. Facing no other options, she made it clear to the desk agent that she was going to file a formal complaint detailing this mistreatment.

From the perspective of the airline employee, accommodating Mrs. Chen's request would violate airline regulations – presenting her with a dilemma. By refusing to issue a boarding pass for the recovering patient, she was clearly ruining a family vacation; however, by following company regulations, she was protecting her employer from potential legal liability (as well as protecting her own job). What would you do?

Possible Solution Options

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions:

- A. Issue the boarding pass without the required medical certification.
- B. Accept a personal waiver claiming the traveler's health is suitable for air travel and absolving the airline of liability.
- C. Issue boarding passes to all family members except the passenger recovering from leg surgery.
- D. Defer to a supervisor's decision to issue the boarding pass without the required medical certificate.

- E. Decline to issue boarding passes to the entire family.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

The decision to allow passengers to board a flight ultimately rests with the airline agent. Airline reservations personnel (including automated online systems) should advise travelers of airline regulations; especially when special accommodations such as wheelchairs are requested. Furthermore, every airline employee should understand that check-in desk supervisors/managers may be called on to make the final decision regarding the issuance of boarding passes. By relying on well-defined policies, regulations, and experienced managers, check-in agents may be able to make more informed, fact-based, and fair decisions.

Deep Assessment

In this case, the medical certification required to issue a boarding pass to passengers based on health considerations presents a dilemma for the desk agent. Companies typically do not willingly choose to deny services to clients – which can drive away customers, possibly for life. However, few companies are faced with the possibility that providing those services may deprive clients of their lives. Given the importance of health to such decisions, most airline companies request formal medical certifications in order to accept impaired passengers. Conversely, a medical certification might be difficult to obtain, especially in China – presenting travelers with obstacles preventing them from flying. For example, the Beijing Daily reported that the Beijing Airport Hospital does not have the authority to issue medical certificates. That is, the China Civil Aviation Authority has not given the Beijing Airport Hospital the right to issue medical certificates (Beijing Daily, 2015). This seems odd since the two organizations share an interest in serving aviation sector customers. Even if the time had allowed for it, Mrs. Chen would not have been able to obtain the required medical certification from the nearby hospital.

References

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Appendix: Solution Point Awards for Multiple Choice Selections

- A. Issue the boarding pass without the required medical certification: 3 points; as Mrs. Chen stated that three months had passed since her father's leg surgery and he could sit, walk, and stand without assistance, there was little reason to doubt he was medically fit to fly. As such, the check-in agent should have been able to conclude that the medical certification requirement was not applicable and she should have issued the boarding pass.
- B. Accept a personal waiver claiming the traveler's health is suitable for air travel and absolving the airline of liability: 2 points; it might be acceptable to allow the impaired passenger to board based on additional analysis following choice A, yet a passenger's personal waiver may not provide the legal coverage needed to absolve the airline of liability should the passenger suffer a medical emergency while traveling.
- C. Issue boarding passes to all family members except the passenger recovering from leg surgery: 0 points; it seems unlikely that family members would board and leave the elderly family member alone at the airport.
- D. Defer to a supervisor's decision to issue the boarding pass without the required medical certificate: 5 points; a supervisor might have more experience with handling such cases and thereby might have been better equipped to make a fact-based decision. Moreover, if additional manpower was brought in to address this unique situation, the passengers might have felt their concerns were being adequately addressed, avoiding the formal complaint.
- E. Decline to issue boarding passes to the entire family: 0 points; this option does not serve the airline nor does it satisfy the customer. By declining to issue boarding passes to the entire family, the airline loses revenue (important in a highly competitive sector characterized by tight profit margins, and cost conscientious management) and alienates perhaps several dozen future customers (i.e., additional family members, friends, co-workers, and others who hear of this through negative word-of-mouth advertising).

The points that you receive for the answer you circled: ____.

Editorial Commentary

This case relates to how airlines handle situations that focus on customer satisfaction while following flight safety rules and regulations. In this case, the medical certification required to issue a boarding pass to passengers based on health considerations presents a dilemma for the desk agent.

Without medical certification, it is difficult, if not impossible, for airline staff to assess whether an impaired traveler is able to travel by air or not (Chang and Chen, 2012). That is, the airline passenger service agent needed to check whether a passenger could travel with the airline shortly after recovering from surgery. In this case, the passenger failed to provide a medical certificate to indicate that the passenger was capable of completing the flight safely without requiring

extraordinary medical care. Staff attitudes toward disabled customers are often cited as the single most important aspect of customer satisfaction with a service (UK Department for Transportation, 2008). In this case, the airline employee was just strictly following the company rules and simply opted for the literal interpretation of the regulation – ignoring the inimical emotions resulting from denying service to the physically-challenged passenger. The resulting conflict at the check-in counter arose due to the different perceptions of the airline agent and the impaired passenger and his family. The airline agent felt the request could not only be detrimental to the passenger, but could also result in liability to herself and her employer. From the passenger's perspective, the airline appeared to be insensitive, bureaucratic, and inflexible. This kind of bad experience can discourage potential customers from flying with the airline again (UK Department for Transportation, 2008). The conflict might have been avoided had the airline employee been willing to reconsider the policy once the passenger proved the wheelchair was not needed (e.g., by demonstrating he could sit, stand and walk without assistance).

Furthermore, instead of allowing the conflict to arise at check-in, proactively communicating with the passenger as soon as the reservation was made could have allowed several options to have been selected in advance (e.g., cancelling the wheelchair request, or obtaining the required medical certification). It could be argued that it is the responsibility of the airline to ensure that their regulations are understood by passengers in advance and before arriving for travel, rather than informing them during the check-in process at the airport.

In this case, the employee is making the right decision. In air passenger transportation, customer safety is often of paramount importance. Even if it cost the airline in terms of future business and customer satisfaction, the airline check-in agent did the right thing even though the family did not understand the concern. The airline should seek to ensure that its employees understand the rules and regulations as well as the priority of decisions. Thus, ensuring effective communication at all stages of the service encountered from the time of the reservation to the pre-departure reconfirmation, as well as during the check-in process, is highly recommended.

The dilemma involves making sure the airline employees understand that passenger safety is more important than customer satisfaction.