

Airline Service Failed!

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Abstract

A passenger was a frequent flyer of Airline A—but decided to try Airline B which offered a particularly cheap ticket. The passenger's flight was delayed and diverted to another airport. Hence, the passenger's plans for the day of the expected flight's arrival were not accomplished. Based on previous flight experiences, the passenger expected an explanation from the pilot and the flight crew regarding the delay and the diversion but did not get any. Moreover, the passenger did not get any assistance from the airline staff during their temporary stay in the alternative airport. The passenger arrived home feeling tired and angry. The passenger decided never to take Airline B again.

Key words: airline customer service; customer loyalty; customer expectation

The Story

My return flight from Cebu where I had visited was booked at 7:45 a.m. My confirmed return ticket stated that the flight was to bring me to Manila by 9:25 a.m. I booked this flight because it was cheaper than my usual flight. I thought that I would be back in Manila early enough to allow me to attend a conference, go to an important lunch meeting, and go home in time for dinner with my family. I skipped breakfast at the Hotel to be on time for my flight to Manila. Upon checking in, I was told that my plane would not be departing for Manila until 9 a.m.!

At 9:15 a.m., we finally took off. I would not make the conference! Still hopeful, I thought that if we got to Manila before noon, I would still be able to meet my guest for lunch. At 11:30 a.m., we were asked to straighten our seats, fasten our seatbelts, and prepare for landing. However, we did not land!

At 11:35, the pilot announced our plane "could not be accommodated." We were being diverted to another airport, Clark; the name is derived from the former American Clark Air Force Base which was the largest overseas base of the United States Air Force until it was closed in 1991 and handed over to the Government of

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the Philippines. There was no explanation why, nor whether Clark was going to be our terminal point or merely a stop. Not having been diverted to Clark before, I did not know how we would be transported to Manila from Clark. Furthermore, there was not a word to those who might miss their connecting flights from Manila because of an extended delay.

On some of my trips abroad, the traffic of incoming planes would sometimes be so heavy that our plane would end up circling overhead several times while waiting for clearance to land. However, the pilot would always inform the passengers about what was happening. We were told about how long we would be delayed and sometimes told our number in the line of planes awaiting clearance to land.

From my seat, I called on the cabin crew asking them to relay my message to the pilot regarding the provision of information about our current situation. The cabin crew listened to me with a blank stare, said nothing, and then shuffled toward the tail of the plane instead of going to the cockpit to relay my request to the captain.

At 12:10 p.m., we landed at Clark, was but a “holding” stop. We sat there until we got clearance to land in Manila. The crew could not answer questions about connecting flights. At 1 p.m., many of the passengers started saying they were hungry. I asked the crew whether we would be given a free meal. However, the attendant said the passengers would have to buy food. At 1:30 p.m., the plane finally took off and at 1:50 p.m., we landed in Manila. All the passengers walked away hungry and with no apology or information from the airline regarding connecting flights or the reason for the delay. I decided then that it will be the last time I will travel using Airline B.

Solutions

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions:

- A. The pilot or copilot should have provided information about the delay and diversion and apologized on behalf of the airline.
- B. The flight crew should have provided information about the delay and diversion and apologized on behalf of the airline.
- C. The flight crew should accompany passengers at Clark with care to distract their anxiety.
- D. The passenger should have known that cheaper fares could result in lesser service.
- E. The pilot should have informed and constantly updated the passengers regarding the flight status. The flight crew should have addressed the concerns of the passengers while on board and while “on hold” at the other airport. The airline should have provided free snacks or drinks while waiting in the temporary airport.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

Solution E is the best solution in the scenario. Customers relied on the estimated time of arrival that the airline provided to plan their itinerary. The delay affected their original plan. For some passengers, the delay had serious repercussion. Providing customers with relevant information can help them understand the circumstances, a step towards earning forgiveness.

Deep Assessment

When one is cruising at an altitude of few thousand meters above sea level while confined to a small space, stress levels can rise and create anxiety. More to the point, I missed an important meeting in the morning and a lunch date with a guest. It is one thing to ask a passenger to accept that there have been uncontrollable factors delaying a flight, quite another to ask a passenger to accept the delay with cockamamie reasons, or worse been asked to accept them blindly.

As many studies (e.g., Santacroce, 2002) suggest, uncertainty breeds anxiety. Information sharing is essential for success in managing situations where plan change is inevitable. For the pilot to navigate the plane, the control center would have had to provide information. However, judging from the nonresponse manner of the flight attendants, I have no choice but to surmise that the captain saw no reason to disseminate the information. The flight attendants were, therefore, ill-equipped to deal with the situation. I must wonder, why wasn't information passed to the crew? Is it because they knew the passengers would not accept the reason for the delay? Doubts like this breed mistrust and make it difficult to build a consensual loyal relationship between customer and the airline company.

It is important that the flight attendants be the source of comfort. In this story, the flight attendants did not offer any food or beverage to the passengers when stranded. Anyone with empathy would have known that many customers had not had breakfast because of catching the early flight. Then there is the "detour" that cost us a few more hours of waiting. As we arrived past noon, lunch should have been offered to the customers. At the very least, some snacks and drinks would have been nice. Providing food as a small token of apology after the massive delay is a necessity to show the airline's remorse.

It is possible that the airline did not prepare this flight to handle the situation. However, even if this was the case, the pilot and the crew could have handled the situation in a better way. The responses of the flight attendants in this story gave an impression that the airline simply did not care about the passengers' inconvenience. As the story said, the author accepts the possibility of flight delay. The main point is that the airline's action resulted in the author, and most likely all of the passengers, never using that airline again and telling others to do the same.

Solution Points Awards for Multiple Choice Selection

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions.

- A. The pilot should have provided information about the delay and diversion and apologized on behalf of the airline. 1 point; the pilot is the conduit of communication between the airplane and the control center. It is, therefore, that person's duty to keep everyone informed, especially in the event of a changing schedule.
- B. The flight crew should have provided information about the delay and diversion and apologized on behalf of the airline. 1 point; the crew is the front-line employee that interacts with passengers directly. They also serve as a liaison between the pilot and the passengers. It is, therefore, their responsibility to provide information to reassure the agitated passengers.
- C. The flight crew should accompany passengers at Clark with care to distract their anxiety. 3 points; it is an unexpected landing at Clark for all people, including passengers, crew, and the pilot. The passengers will feel comfortable and believe the airline is on their side if the flight crew can accompany passengers at Clark, even if they only have limited services.
- D. The passenger should have known that cheaper fares could result in lesser service. 0 point; the airline might be able to save a few bucks by denying passengers any additional services. However, it is evident in this story that the airline has lost at least one customer.
- E. The pilot should have constantly informed and updated the passengers regarding the flight status. The flight crew should have addressed the concerns of the passengers while on board the plane and at the temporary airport. The airline could have provided free snacks or drinks while waiting at the temporary airport. 5 points; information update and words of comfort do not cost an airline a dime, yet they can serve quite well in earning the customers' forgiveness. The provision of foods and drinks could cost extra for the airline, but it can further mitigate customers' displeasure.

Your points score for this case study: _____

Editorial Commentary

Airline companies invariably face the possibility of flight delay (McCollough et al., 2000). With a plane thousands of meters up and few hundred miles away from a destination, there is very little anyone can do to accelerate the arrival time. The impact of a delay on each passenger on a delayed flight obviously varies. A customer might miss an interview for a wonderful job that he or she would otherwise get, or miss a chance to see one's parent one last time. However, in general, there is no reason for an airline to compensate passengers for lost time and missed opportunities that result from flight delay. When delays are out of the airline's control, reasonable compensation relates to dealing fairly with the passengers while they are "the responsibility" of the airline.

Grewal et al. (2008) suggest that customers tend to forgive and forgo claiming monetary compensation when delay is not a regular occurrence and not the airline's fault. This suggests that it is possible to rectify the situation depicted in the story if the pilot and the cabin crew handle the situation appropriately. The airline employees in the story fail to act appropriately during the service failure. Why is that? If I have to hazard a guess, I would say the airline is hiding something. For example, the airline had to stop at Clark for a reason they do not want to disclose rather than the impossibility of landing at the original destination. This might not be true, but is it not worse to let the customers guess about the cause of the delay?

By providing the information to the passengers, the airline could achieve two goals. First, information can successfully calm the passenger down and gradually working towards earning their understanding. Providing adequate information can help alleviate passengers' anxiousness by minimizing uncertainty. Second, it is possible to establish that the delay is not the airline's fault and simply a regrettable situation that could not have been foreseen. This effectively exonerates the airline from any liability (if true). Providing information is a very cost-effective way to service recovery unless there is something to hide.

The airline company of this story seems to be a "low-cost" airline. Obviously, there are cost concerns involved when deciding which service recovery strategies should be employed. Providing additional food and drink on an occasionally delayed flight may do more to allow operation on a small profit margin by keeping customers than it does harm. If the airplane and beverage on board and these could not be obtained at Clark, an explanation would have helped. Furthermore, the airline can offer meal coupons or vouchers for passengers to use at food courts at the destination airport.

The length of the delay is also an issue. The study of Grewal et al. (2008) indicates that 9.7 minutes constitute a reasonable delay in terms of waiting for boarding. The study also showed that 35 minutes is an unreasonable waiting time. Although the study is about waiting for boarding, the flight in the story had a delay of around 5 hours; somebody with authority in the airline should have been informed and done more for the passengers to retain customers.

In this story, solution E is the best way to deal with the situation. It involves using food and information to satisfy the passengers about the delay. The solution also highlights the fact that both pilot and cabin crew needed to play their part in the service recovery. The pilot represents an authority figure whose apology will be more effective than a subordinate's apology (Walfisch et al., 2013). Same goes for information conveyed. Cabin crew, as frontline employees, can get a better read on customers' emotional responses and provide more direct interaction. The only thing missing in solution E is an explanation for the delay and diversion. The combination of delay and diversion cost the passengers several hours to get to the destination. Without any plausible reason, it is very difficult to endure any loss of time. This is probably why the author did not award solution E with higher marks.

Airline service failure always results in inconvenience. However, when the delay is not within the control of the airline, financial compensation for service

recovery can only reasonably extend to making passengers comfortable (e.g., providing food and drink). That is why financial compensation is not listed in any of the solution offered by the author. The cheap and effective approach for the airline is sharing information, a cost-free way to seek customers' favor.

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