

More than Just a Stamp in My Passport

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Abstract

A passenger named Maria is about to board a plane in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 11th June 2010, in emigrating to New Zealand. Leaving everything behind, Maria is experiencing melancholic emotions while walking through immigration. The uncertainty and distress of leaving her family behind might mean that she won't be able to board the flight. Will Maria be able to control the tears and manage to embark on her planned journey? The immigration officer, Lerato, notices that the passenger is heavyhearted and she is more than willing to get involved.

Key words: exceptional service; emotional intelligence; emotional contagion; customer experience

Story

With tear-drenched cheeks and a brave heart, Maria is making her way through the queues. She can still taste her favorite meal from her favorite restaurant (Spur Steakhouse). She realizes that she will not get her favorite food in her new, so-called home. The thought of having to say goodbye to loved ones and knowing that she might not see them again is breaking her heart. All these thoughts are going through her head. She can still smell her dad's aftershave on her collar, resulting in an explosion of tears. In her hand, she is still clutching her mother's white hanky with embroidered lavender flowers. Lavender, she thinks, is her mom's favorite flower. While she is dabbing her cheeks dry, she can smell her mother. Maria's mother always kept a hanky in her pocket, just in case someone might need it.

Trying to occupy her mind, Maria is working out which immigration officer will become available first. If only she can stop crying. "Next please," says a friendly voice. Maria stumbles across to the counter. The immigration officer says "Good evening, I need to view and stamp your passport." Maria looks up at the officer, Lerato. Again Lerato asks, "Good evening, do you have your passport ready so I can stamp it?" Maria discerns that there is nothing good about this evening and feels pressured for holding up the line. In the process of taking out her passport, she

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drops her entire carry-on bag. Enough is enough; Maria has had a long and emotional day and is feeling alone. Maria starts crying uncontrollably. Lerato steps out of her cubicle and moves towards Maria. Lerato starts gathering Maria's belongings and says, "I will get it, you don't have to worry about a thing." Maria stands back, appreciating this kind angelic stranger. Lerato wraps her arms around Maria saying, "Everything will be OK". After Lerato has gone out of her way to comfort Maria, she also arranges for ground staff to assist Maria to her gate.

Strategies

Select (✓) one of the following strategies/possible outcomes regarding the trade talk case study.

- A. The passenger should have been advised to cancel her flight and go home with her loved ones.
- B. Lerato should have called border security and declared the passenger unfit to travel.
- C. Lerato should have consoled the passenger with a hug and arranged for ground staff to take the passenger to the departure gate.
- D. Lerato should have just continued doing her job and stamped passports.
- E. Lerato's supervisor should have given Maria the opportunity to check into the Airport's hotel at their cost and fly out the next morning.

Surface Assessment

Going above and beyond the customer's expectation is more important than ever. Lerato delivered a high level of customized service and went the extra mile in order to assist the emotional passenger. Lerato managed to identify Maria's need and to provide a service satisfying that need; in this case, kindness and a hug. Because of Lerato's out-of-the-box thinking, she managed to save the day and Maria continued her journey.

Deep Assessment

I feel that option C is the best solution because Maria would have been satisfied and Lerato did display exceptional customer service. Not a lot more can be done to make this customer's experience outstanding. Lerato's friendly and helpful nature resulted in something stupendous. It is well known that an employee's emotional state will have an impact on the customer service they are providing. Payne & Frow (2013) suggest that a positive mood can increase problem-solving skills. This can be seen through Lerato's quick decision-making to console and assist Maria (Payne & Frow, 2013, p. 83). A teleological perspective can be noticed in Lerato's actions. She had to act on instinct and was focused on providing a positive outcome for her decisions. She did not measure up rights and wrongs, but was more focused on providing the best outcome for her passenger (Solomon et al., 2013, p.18).

It is not in Lerato's job description to be a counselor; however, she made sure that Maria left the country feeling better. It is clear that Lerato was customer experience-driven. Lerato realized that her service could be more than just a stamp in somebody's passport. Lerato truly cared about Maria and her wellbeing. Lerato had the ability to analyze Maria's needs, wants and emotions, even if it meant giving a hug and providing reassurance that everything would be alright. Lerato managed to turn the situation around and created a memorable personalized customer interaction.

Multiple Choice

- A. The passenger should have been advised to cancel her flight and go back home with her loved ones. 0 Points. It would be unethical for people working in the travel industry to advise cancellation of flights. Even though Lerato might have gained a perception of Maria not wanting to depart, this does not mean that this would have been in Maria's best interest.
- B. Lerato should have called border security and declared the passenger unfit to travel. 0 Points. Lerato could have contacted border security, but this would have caused inconvenience for Maria and her family. Just imagine how concerned Maria's family would have been if they had heard that she was declared unfit to travel. Fortunately, Lerato had high levels of Emotional Intelligence, and could notice that Maria was only experiencing a temporary sadness (Robbins & Judge, 2014, p. 80).
- C. Lerato consoled the passenger with a hug and arranged for ground staff to take the passenger to the departure gate. 8 points. Maria's behavior was signaling that she was emotional and needed help. Lerato's high levels of Emotional Intelligence led to her reading Maria's emotional cues. Emotional Intelligence is an individual's ability to recognize emotions in his or her self and others (Robbins & Judge, 2014, p. 80). Lerato managed to find a customized solution for Maria's needs. Because Maria was highly emotional and possibly disorientated, Lerato arranged for assistance to escort Maria to her gate. Maria felt relieved after dealing with Lerato and Emotional contagion (Solomon et al., 2013, p. 509) can be noticed. Lerato's pleasant character and confidence rubbed off onto Maria, resulting in her continuing her journey.
- D. Lerato should have just continued doing her job and stamped passports. 0 Points. Lerato could have just been an average immigration officer stamping passports with no concern about the people she connected with. It is possible that her job description (Stone, 2014, p. 171) only included stamping passports and line processing as quickly as possible, no matter what.
- E. Lerato's supervisor gave Maria the opportunity to check into the Airport's hotel at their cost and fly out the next morning. 2 Points. This might have been convenient for the passenger, but would have been costly for the Airport. According to Payne (Payne & Frow, 2013, p. 328), the objective for most businesses should be to offer an outstanding customer experience but at an affordable cost. For this very reason, putting Maria up in a hotel might be convenient for her but not necessarily needed.

Additional emotional drainage might also be caused if Maria had to repeat the departure process.

References

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Editorial Commentary

This story highlights how consumers from different cultures and different demographics may experience the very same service offering differently; or even how the same customer may experience the same offering at different times of their lives. As an example, people buy the service of being transferred between destinations (traveling) for quite different reasons, and thus experience the very same offering utterly differently at different times. Let's focus on those passengers who are clearly stressed or emotionally aroused. Using this lens, one will already notice vastly different emotive reactions by passengers. One clearly stressed passenger might be flying to attend a stressful business negotiation in another part of their own country, another passenger might be travelling to meet her future husband and the emotional excitement is about the upcoming wedding; still another passenger might be in a state of emotional arousal due to a long-planned holiday abroad at last being realized, but some level of inner conflict is experienced due to young children who have to stay behind. In the last-mentioned case, the emotional upheaval is the result of the imminent parting with everything near and dear. You may ask, how is the service representative of the airline to know? The narrator of the trade tale clearly provides the answer: social iQ or EQ (emotional intelligence). There are people who are able to resonate with others and read social situations carefully and correctly (Goleman; 2006). Your response may be: How does the customer care manager in charge of the customer experience achieve either recruiting or developing high levels of EQ in staff, or both? Two management and leadership gurus (Goleman 2006; Boyatzis; 2011) provide us with some answers to this question. Daniel Goleman (2006) suggests that experience and frank feedback will aid in this process, whereas Richard Boyatzis (2011) suggests coaching; reflection in and after action; and developing self-awareness and relational capabilities such as networking skills.

In this trade tale the customer appreciated the hug. Although not all consumers appreciated or even tolerate personal touching, consumer research indicates (Guéguen et al., 2007) that being touched by a sales person or customer care representative on the forearm or hand improves attitude and is likely to result in reduced anxiety (Jansson-Boyd, 2011). The scholar Jansson-Boyd (2011) reports an increased positive response to instructions and requests; increased acceptance of suggested alternative solutions in difficult inter-personal interactions; and increased sales in some retail scenarios. So, perhaps marketers and staff trainers can take note of the importance of social, inter-personal skills and not purely select frontline staff on the basis of their technical competencies, but also for their handshaking (hugging) abilities, and more importantly in regard to their emotional intelligence. (Sounds a bit like electing politicians? Exactly!)

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