Managing Customer Expectations for Passenger Service at Airports

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1. Scope

In the increasingly competitive world of air travel today, people travel more frequently than ever before. Passengers around the world are raising their expectations for quality and service when travelling through airports. With growing customer expectation, airports have become more and more committed to continuously improving customer service standards. While airports with brand new facilities certainly have an advantage in winning the hearts of customers, passengers are often delighted by airports which are willing to go the extra mile to please their customers.

- Explain the concept of managing customer expectation in the context of passenger service; and
- Illustrate the concept with examples and how it makes the difference for the success of an airport business

2. Introduction

Airports around the world are constantly evolving and growing at a rapid rate to keep up with the ever-increasing demand of passenger numbers – along with their expectations. As passenger numbers increase, airports must increase their commitment to improve their service standards. Customers today are more knowledgeable and have higher expectations of airports than ever before. To achieve success, airports need to have exceptional strategic plans in place to be able to adequately manage the expectations of their customers. By prioritising customer service in airport business plans, it sets standards and direction moving forward to ensure the customer is always considered with every decision the airport makes.

It is critical that as we grow, we understand our customers and their needs. We must understand our customers’ expectations of a great passenger experience and where possible surpassing their expectations by going the extra mile to make sure that your customers are happy – after all customers must be the number one priority. To do this we must have a strong customer service culture and staff commitment.

In today’s modern world, with the rapid advancement of technology, business travel, air travel affordability making travel more accessible to more people, security, global factors, social media and other external pressures all affect the way an airport operates. Through all of this our customers expect and deserve the best facilities. Passengers are becoming more informed, more empowered and want to personalise their trip. Information is power and that puts customers in the pilot’s seat. (Joanne Paternoster, Airport World Magazine, October 2012)

Informed customers feel they are more in control of their experience and are happier customers, translating into less stress for them, the airport and its staff. There is no doubting that the need for revenue is driving airport change and probably the most important of these is the drive to maximise non-aeronautical revenue.

Over the past decade, the passenger experience has become an important focus at airports all over the world. A range of external pressures have driven more airports to focus on customer satisfaction and service quality. These include direct competition for passengers and network carriers, the need to maximise non-aeronautical revenue, local community, government and media pressures.

Research shows that when overall satisfaction levels rise, non-aeronautical revenue grows as well.

Source: DKMA commercial research based on analysis of publicly available data from airports all over the world
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Happy customers make smart business sense but it goes further than this. Strong airports are key economic drivers. They are often the first impression for the travelling visitor and locals have pride in their airport – they expect it to make a statement. Successful airports exert great confidence and provide a positive flow on effect to the rest of their journey – the airport may not be their final destination but it should be treated as one.

Adelaide Airport has experienced significant growth over the past 15 years. In 1997/98 our total passenger numbers were 4 million. In 2014 we will hit 8 million. Our international passenger numbers have grown from 230,000 to 1 million in 2014. “It’s interesting to look back at excerpts of the 1998/99 annual report following Adelaide Airport Limited’s first full year of operation. Under the heading building for the future, we outlined our vision for the future – largely built around construction of the terminal and attracting more airlines flying to more destinations. What stands out if you read the vision is that, everything we said we wanted to achieve – we’ve achieved. That’s what we can do in just 16 years – imagine what we can achieve in the next 30 years!” (Mark Young, Managing Director, New Brand Launch 2014).

Our vision today is “to be a top tier Airport Business Centre in Asia Pacific, recognised for delivering exceptional outcome to our customers, partners, shareholders and community” For us, top tier doesn’t mean being the biggest. What it does mean is we will exceed the expectations of an airport our size in the Asia Pacific region. Meeting and exceeding our customers’ expectations is a vital component for our airport to successfully build our brand and achieve our vision.

3. Who are our customers?

To manage customer expectations we must firstly know who our customers are and get to know them. Understanding the demographics of key segments will allow focus to improving the customer experience. This is important because not all passengers think the same way or experience the airport the same way e.g. a business passenger versus a leisure passenger. Leisure passengers may accept longer waits in queues than business passengers for example but they still expect an efficient and reasonable process all of the time. Due to the complexities of various passenger profiles, it is important to find common ground with regard to expectations and focus on getting this right. To optimise the passenger experience we must identify what matters most to passengers and focus efforts on improving that. The key is to find a consistent balance and maintain this constantly.

Airports are dynamic sites and customers are not just the passengers themselves. An airport has many customer types – staff, contractors, tenants, airlines for example all form part of the customer profile. Consistent management of all the different customer types is important. Different customer service standards between airline and retail staff for example can greatly affect the customers overall experience. This highlights the importance of setting customer service standards across the airport community and sharing a common vision. Constant consultation with these stakeholders is critical. It provides them with a clear understanding of the standards we expect. It also helps them integrate and align our customer expectations into their business plans so that we can reach our vision together.

4. Understanding and Meeting Customer Expectations

Our airport is an iconic South Australian brand and a gateway to South Australia. It is a facility we are proud of. The days of an airport being a conduit of getting from one location to another are long gone. Today our customers expect a modern vibrant airport to provide a seamless, efficient and immersive experience the moment they get out of their car to their departure. They expect high tech check-in and boarding facilities, unique shopping and dining experiences, diverse ground transport options and state of the art communications just to name a few. But firstly, it is important that we understand what the key drivers of customer satisfaction are and focus on getting these areas right.
In a recent training course held in Adelaide by DKMA on Quality of Service, we discussed the rules for a great passenger experience. Focussing on the global influencing factors, which are the areas that all passengers experience, such as cleanliness, ambience and washrooms should always be the first priority. Once you have these basics right, the next step is to focus on airport processes. Processes should not be the main focus but it is important to ensure that areas such as check-in, security screening and wayfinding are easy and do not cause stress for passengers. Once your global influencing factors and processes meet customer expectations and your customer service standards, then the focus can turn to creating a unique experience and sense of place that sets your airport apart from the rest.

If you ask passengers what they generally expect to experience at an airport, more often than not their response will include: long queues, obtrusive security measures, unfriendly airport staff, dirty restrooms, uncomfortable gate areas, plenty of hassle, and absolutely no fun! This may have become a global airport stereotype, but more and more progressive and well-rated airports are challenging and redefining the new "customer excellence" normal for airports. (Joanne Paternoster, Airport World Magazine, October 2012)

The best airports are now constantly exceeding these basic requirements and are evolving to continuously improve the experience. Manicured gardens, live entertainment, luxury lounges, high end retail, specialised food and beverage, butterfly enclosures, art displays this list goes on. Airports are constantly going the extra mile however if you haven’t got the basic key drivers right to satisfy expectations, it is all wasted and will not improve overall satisfaction levels.

Creating lasting change: Optimising the passenger experience

DKMA Studies recommend airports to approach this in a systematic way using 4 key elements to get it right.

- **Terminal Interest:** Light, cleanliness, condition colours, clutter, consistency: By far the most important is the terminal itself as all passengers see the terminal and have an opinion based on their experiences.
- **Staff Pride:** Giving staff purpose and incentivising a customer focused frame of mind: Ensures high standards. This is not just for frontline staff but particularly cleaning, maintenance staff and shop staff due to their constant visability to the customer.
- **Processes / Queues:** Minimising the negative impact of queues on the passenger experiences: They are generally are only noticed if they are bad. Customers expect queues but if they are not managed well it will greatly effect overall satisfaction.
- **Touches of Excellence:** Making the passenger experience special and personal: The above will make your airport good but going the extra mile by exceeding there expectations will make it great, unique and stand out from the rest – touches of excellence such as speactly shops, live music/orchestras, water features, interactive displays, spas and gardens all add to a feeling of quality that will stick in the mind of passengers.

5. How do we know if we are meeting their expectations?

The passenger experience is complex – from access and parking to check-in, security, retail, toilets, wayfinding and gates it only takes one bad experience to ruin all customer satisfaction efforts. We must adapt with demand and always look ahead. Innovation, exceptional customer service and by staying ahead of the game – the best airports make sure they are constantly evolving and try to anticipate what the passenger experience will look like in 10-15 years.

Adelaide Airport participates in the Airport Council International (ACI) Airport Service Quality (ASQ) surveys. The ASQ programme has approximately 255 participating airports in more than 50 countries and is the largest managed airport quality of service program. ASQ surveys seek passenger responses to 34 items; including
“helpfulness of check-in staff” to “waiting time at security control” and “passport inspection”. Feedback is always welcomed. We have a structured process for feedback handling to ensure consistent customer service standards.

In addition to the ASQ surveys, Adelaide Airport recently undertook additional customer research with the general public, Adelaide Airport staff, commercial contractors, retailers and associates. This research has helped us to gain a better understanding of the brand attributes, users and stakeholders associated with our airport. One of the key survey questions from these surveys was what customers liked about Adelaide Airport compared to other airports they had been to. This enabled us to get an overall “snap-shot” on how our customers perceived the airport and our brand.

![Graph showing preferences for Adelaide Airport](image)

Source – Market Research Pure Profile database

Asked what they liked about Adelaide Airport, the majority of open ended comments related to “ease” of use. Some referred to easy access, ease of parking and finding gate lounges and generally just the ease of getting around. The fact that we are a smaller airport also added to these perceptions. These findings are consistent with our ASQ results that also confirm the key positive of our airport to be easy, efficient and friendly.

Brand associations are also great tools to use through surveys because they trigger questions that are “open-ended” and respondents generally write down a wide range of thoughts and words they associate through a collection of attributes, thoughts and associations that we store in our minds triggered by awareness of a product, name or organisation.
For example – “What words, thoughts or images do you associate with…”

The associations the general public respondents had with Adelaide Airport were unanimously positive. Using these simple tools provides invaluable information on how our customers feel and perceive our airport and allows us to use this data as key drivers for business strategic plans moving forward.

Most importantly we need to listen to our customers and value their opinions – their voice carries much weight in the success of any business.

A number of benchmark surveys and tools are now being used to compare and contrast airport performance. While these tools can swiftly place an airport compared to its peers, they rarely provide insight into how to improve the passenger experience so therefore it is important to invest the time to thoroughly analyse this data as it is extremely valuable to the business.
6. Initiatives for Improvement

Adelaide Airport has a number of initiatives and plans in place to ensure continuous improvement in meeting customer expectations.

**Internal Customer Service Standards / Our Values / Our Brand / Our Promise**

Our values explained –

- **Conduct ourselves with integrity:** Go about our business with honesty and uphold strong morals.
- **Accountable and authentic:** Be responsible and able to justify our actions, while remaining genuine and true to ourselves and customers, internal and external.
- **Responsive, efficient, respectful:** Understand time pressures of our workload, prioritise demands appropriately and react quickly and in a positive manner. Treat everyone as equals.
- **Take pride in our achievements:** Share our achievements with others – internal and external.
- **Be open and friendly and encourage diversity:** Present ourselves in a positive and approachable manner, ensure our team remains inclusive of all others.
- **Build relationships based on trust:** Remaining honest in our day-to-day interactions, both internally and externally, will help strengthen connections through demonstrated dutifulness towards cohesion.
- **Foster great teams:** Collaboration based on complementary skills sets will ensure teams at Adelaide Airport are working at maximum potential. Nurturing relationships with fellow team members will assist developing a positive working culture.

In harmony with our company values and in pursuit of excellence in customer service standards “Our Promise” describes the commitment, attitude and behaviours expected of us to maintain a culture of great customer service.

“Our Promise” ensures we hold each other and ourselves to the highest standards and ultimately defines how we are perceived as a company.
These values are displayed around all working areas of the airport and in office building common areas and we have displayed large posters of “Our Promise to Each Other” and “Moments that Matter”. These are an easy visual reference to remind us to live “Our Promise” every day and keep customer service standards in the forefront of our minds. These are discussed at staff appraisals and are a company-wide KPI for all of us.
External Customer Service Standards

Our Customer Experience team at Adelaide Airport are currently working on identifying our core customer groups in an effort to better understand our customers and manage relationships with identified key stakeholders and customer groups.

Terminal Facilities and Services

From the ASQ results that identify the key drivers for customer satisfaction specific to Adelaide Airport, we are implementing a number of initiatives to improve these areas. Thorough analysis of ASQ data allows airport management to confidently make business decisions and investments to upgrade or improve key drivers that directly affect customer satisfaction. In 2014 the following improvements were identified:

- Washroom upgrades
- Wayfinding review and improvements
- Seating upgrades
- New check-in technology – self check-in and bag drop facilities

Security Processes

Security and safety are always paramount for any airport.

We have recently modified the queuing space and passenger flow at our main screening point. This has helped to improve the waiting times and efficiency of our screening process. The roller beds and tables have also been updated to assist passengers to divest their belongings without causing disruption to the passenger flow.

In addition, we have installed feedback stations using tablets at the screening point to gather feedback from customers in a timely manner.

We consider the health, safety and wellbeing of our staff and our customers a key priority for operating a successful business. We deliver high quality facilities and services that are regarded as best in class, safe, secure and sustainable.

Keeping Our Customers Safe

Adelaide Airport Limited (AAL) recognises its duty of care to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of workers and visitors to its sites. Accordingly safety forms one of our core values and is a key focus. AAL is committed to establishing measurable WHS objectives and targets to ensure continuous improvement aimed at the elimination of work-related injury and illness to our staff, customers and the airport community. Airports must be committed in complying with all relevant regulatory and other requirements to ensure our customers are safe.

We implement and maintain a Work Health and Safety Management System and promote a continuous improvement approach to the management of health and safety throughout the business. It is important we integrate health and safety management with other business, financial, operational and human resource planning and management.

To align with our vision we work in consultation with and communicate to all employees, contractors and the airport community on health and safety issues in the workplace to ensure positive safety culture throughout the precinct. Customers notice a strong safety presence and the feeling of being safe puts them at ease in what can be a high stress, anxious environment. Due diligence, constant monitoring, auditing, reporting and controlling all hazards is the aim to eliminate any injury and illness to the customer.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the industry, it is imperative that safety is maintained. Keeping airports safe is everyone’s responsibility – grounds staff, operations staff, baggage handlers, cleaners, airlines, aircraft maintenance, regulators, contractors, tenants, passengers, emergency services, pilots and the general public all
have an important role to play in airport safety. It is important that we keep a look out for all potential hazards that may impact your airport. Safety starts with the responsibility for your own personal wellbeing and it is everyone’s responsibility to take safety seriously. A safer industry means a better workplace, a better passenger experience and a sustainable future for all involved.

Partnerships with Contractors

Adelaide Airport manages partnerships with key contractors to ensure seamless customer service. Consulting with and implementing agreed customer service KPIs ensures key contractors such as cleaners and security staff, which influence key satisfaction drivers greatly, fully understand the customer service standards expected of them. It allows airport management to monitor performance levels to ensure excellence in customer service. We want to be the best, excel at what we do and inspire others to follow our lead.

Property Development

We strongly believe that aviation is a vital catalyst for economic growth. Adelaide Airport has just launched its new 30 year strategic plan which incorporates an exciting vision for the future. Our plans include a new Airport Business District, airport hotel, enhancements to an integrated road network, and terminal facility improvements. As the gateway for international and South Australian business, we are ensuring we provide convenient, connected and seamless spaces for our many customers.

7. How Meeting Customer Expectations Makes a Difference

Research undertaken by DKMA shows that increased overall satisfaction = increase in non-aeronautical revenue. Happier passengers are more likely to buy and spend more on average –it’s a fact!

ASQ data shows that airports most satisfied passenger will:

![Image showing satisfaction metrics]

Source: DKMA Airport Retail and F&B Survey

To achieve these results airports need to work smarter, not harder, by understanding the passenger experience. There is no one answer to creating a great passenger experience or a great ambience. This is why many airports struggle to make a dramatic change in the passenger experience without building a new facility. There is a tendency to try to work ever harder at the existing business model, but this is unsustainable and tends not to show a great difference. To make a step change in performance, it is necessary to make a step-by-step change in approach. This means prioritising effectively, address the fundamental issues first to a high level and see the airport as your customers do and create an outstanding experience for all different types of passenger, not just those that like to shop. Adopting this frame of mind helps airport management achieve significant improvements in satisfaction levels without spending a lot of money and reap the benefits of an increase in non-aeronautical revenue that results from an improved passenger experience.

The key is to set realistic customer expectations, and then not to just meet them, but to exceed them -- preferably in unexpected and helpful ways. Setting customer expectations at a level that is aligned with consistently deliverable levels of customer service requires that your whole staff, from product development to marketing, works in harmony with your brand image. (Richard Branson)
8. Summary

Throughout my research, it has suggested that airport brands are dominated by physical associations that either add to or subtract from the enjoyment of a travel experience. People tend to think of airports in terms of the attributes and/or barriers that make this experience either positive or negative. Additionally there was a view that an airport needs to reflect the nature of the city it serves. Survey results show that the most commonly used word was “easy”. Easy had a range of interpretations from easy to access, easy to park, easy to find flights etc. Ease along with exceptional connectivity, seamless processes and friendliness is the hallmark of our business and the experience we are committed to offer our customers travelling through our airport.

At Adelaide Airport, we are building a culture of professionalism, excellence, responsiveness and achievement which all reflect on how customers view us as a business. By working towards a common vision with a well-defined set of values that are part of the management of customer service and enables us to be committed to living these values on a daily basis. Our bold vision is driven from the ground up through the people and the success of our company can be attributed to each and every staff member pulling together as one team.

The culture we have cultivated is inclusive, safe, collaborative, innovative and sustainable. Our staff are friendly and respectful to one another, provide exceptional internal and external customer service. We are committed to continuously improving customer service standards and we are willing to go the extra mile to please our customers.

By the nature of the stakeholders involved in this research, Adelaide Airport is at least two different brands and we have implemented this. To the general public it is a building with a range of functions, experiences and characteristics. To commercial customers and their staff it is a building, but it is also group of people, relationships and styles of interaction. Adelaide Airport is a consumer brand, Adelaide Airport Limited is a business brand but we view the customer as one and are continually striving to achieve and exceed their expectations – it is our vision and we look forward to many more years of providing a top tier customer experience!