

September 17, 2011

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Dear Professor McPherson,

It is perfectly understandable to think that in the information age your experience with the airline would be streamlined and more efficient. However, the information age has actually increased the gap between customer and staff. It would be nice to think that an airline would flag you as a gold member, noticed that you checked no bags, and made all of the necessary arrangements to get you onto the next flight. However, because airline staff interacts so frequently with the computers, they often forget that there is a human element to the names they see on the screen.

In this situation there were three problems at play:

Problem 1: You're Just a Ticket Number

As your plane was pulling into the gate, the attendants were probably thinking about how quickly they needed to turn the plane over for the next flight to board. Their minds were on the next flight, not the one coming in. They probably knew that there were X number of Gold Card members on the plane, and probably knew that X number of people on the flight had a connecting flight. They didn't need to pay attention to the rest because the computer was doing it for them.

Problem 2: Computers Simply Don't Have Human Brains

For a company to integrate a system that flags certain discrete situations and provides solutions, there would need to be intense R&D, significant funding, and most likely a competing airline with a similar initiative. None of these being present in today's cash strapped airlines, these systems just don't exist. A computer can't pluck out an issue if it's not told to. In the past, an airline staff member would have looked at a flight manifest, maybe even studied the connecting flights, and had the intuition to recognize just what you wanted the airline's computers to recognize. Computers just don't have that intuition like a human would have.

Problem 3: How Much Work Did You Do For Paying \$2,500?

It's common knowledge in the customer service industry that the longer you give the customer to think about their situation, the quicker they will boil over with anger. That's why companies have strict guidelines on how long to keep customers on hold. Or, why you are interrupted while on hold with special offers, or gimics. The companies don't want you to think about how angry you are. You paid \$2,500 to be late to your first destination, rush to meet a connecting flight, miss the connecting flight, and be ignored by the gate staff. The airline should have provided its high paying customers with escorts through the airport, or some kind of distraction as soon as the first inconvenience hit so that you didn't have time to dwell on your misfortune.

All around your experience with the airline was poor. However, they did redeem themselves with the eventually satisfying flight to Frankfurt. This just goes to prove that customer service can, in theory, be improved with technology. (You did, after all, see the 7:55pm flight on a flat-panel television kiosk) However, in practice, technology hasn't yet been perfected to solve the issue completely. This leaves customer service in the hands of human beings, and humans at the end of the day are far from infallible.

Sincerely,
Sam Dowd