

Assigning the blame for airport woes

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A small glitch as glitches go: Stuck in the departure lounge at Gatwick Airport for a frustrating 40 minutes waiting to board our Easyjet flight while the air bridge to the door of the plane was repaired. EasyJet apologized for the delay; but it was the airport's fault. Had we missed our take-off slot, no doubt we would have blamed the airline.

When things go wrong at airports, everybody is quick to blame everybody else. Airlines blame airport authorities or air traffic congestion, along with civil aviation policy; airport management blames customs, immigration, and security staff, over whom they have little or no control; travellers are as likely to blame an airline as an airport, or both, or everyone in range, when things go awry. Jean-Claude Baumgarten, president of the World Travel & Tourism Council, said, 'Airlines would love to be able to control the whole customer experience but they can't. Whoever runs the airport has the responsibility but not the overall control. That is the problem that needs thinking about.'

This sentiment is echoed by James Cherry, president and CEO of Montreal-Trudeau International Airport, which is at the forefront of self-service technology, such as check-in kiosks, self-boarding gates, fast-track options for pre-screened travellers, self-tagging of baggage, and mobile-phone check-in. 'The real frustration, the real challenge we have is trying to serve our customers without having complete control and influence over all aspects of service,' Cherry says.

'Check-in, for example. We give airlines all the facilities they need, but sometimes they don't staff the counters properly, and people have to wait in line; the same thing with customs. We have a very large customs hall with 26 posts, but sometimes they are only half staffed, although they know the schedules, arrival patterns, what loads are coming. If they don't meet the staffing, the airport looks bad. I've been blamed for things you wouldn't imagine. You have to count on the support of other people. We get crucified sometimes because waiting time in customs is 45 minutes, when our target is 20 minutes at peak time.'

Montreal-Trudeau's fast-track program called NEXUS, based upon iris and fingerprint recognition, allows pre-approved Canadian residents or citizens, and U.S. citizens, to clear customs and immigration in about 30 seconds, if they just have hand baggage.

'Fast-track programs are seen in other parts of the world,' Cherry says. 'Business passengers can check in on their PDAs, like Blackberries, and get their boarding passes; so we're quite innovative in things like that. We had long lines at security like everybody else, but we've dedicated ample space to search points, and lines actually quite manageable. We focus not on the average wait time, but on wait times at peak periods. Some government agencies confound the issue by saying our average wait time is very good. But it doesn't matter how long it takes to go through at 10 in the morning; what matters is the time you go through at the rush hour.'

Cherry interviews 1,800 customers every quarter, tracking their impressions of the airport, and how well they think it is doing, based on 75 variables that they believe are important.

‘And we are doing better all the time,’ Cherry says. ‘The most important things are security, a sense of safety; signs and communications have to be clear, which way to walk; the availability and presence of staff; people being treated with respect; and fluidity of movement through the airport. And that’s a big deal when you think about having to park your car, bringing your bags in to the counter agent; going to different check-points; there’s a lot of ways where the system can go off the rails. It’s not one single thing; it’s a combination of things.’

Cherry is active in the Airports Council International, a trade organization that he says is focusing increasingly on customer service – giving awards to airports that do a good job. He has been ‘impressed and inspired by things I’ve seen in other airports,’ such as Vancouver; Copenhagen; Munich (‘terrific’); Zurich (‘reasonably good in serving the customers’); Kuala Lumpur; Incheon in Korea (‘these guys are going out of their way to improve services, the customer experience’).

Unlike some airports, where shareholders’ profit motive interest is arguably inimical to the public interest in what is often a local monopoly, Montreal-Trudeau Airport is an unusual form of ‘privately-held not-for-profit organization.’ It is run by a board of 15 directors, which comprise representatives from the Federal and Quebec governments, and local municipalities, and business people.

‘The Canadian model, when we were privatized in 1992, was to lease the airport to not-for-profit organizations,’ Cherry says. ‘We are independent financially, pay rent to the government and make our own investments; any surplus has to be reinvested in the airport itself – there are no shareholders to benefit.’

‘If we wanted to have best customer service in the world, we’d have to pour more money in,’ Cherry adds. ‘But if we wanted to have the best financial result, the easiest way would be to cut back on customer service. We are constantly trying to find the optimum balance between making enough money to make ends meet, and reinvest, and making it a good deal for the airlines that operate here; maximizing the quality of service, and being very respectful of the environment. I believe that being not-for-profit gives us that balance. We can’t let one or the other of those get out of whack, while letting the others suffer.’

Original article by Roger Collis