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A Mickey Mouse idea

Miami airport, others look to Disney for help with ailing customer service



Ben Grefsrud / msnbc.com

By Harriet Baskas

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What do airports and [Disney World](#) have in common?

They both serve millions of people every year and everyone must stand in line before they can get on a ride.

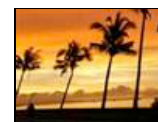
But there are other similarities: Airports and Disney parks operate or coordinate parking and transportation services, restaurants and shops. And both entities employ teams of security, maintenance and custodial personnel. And there's rarely any downtime in the business day.

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But while workers (or “cast members”) at the Magic Kingdom routinely get high marks for courtesy and customer service, the staff at our nation’s airports rarely do. So when the folks at [Miami International Airport](#) decided to beef up



their service to passengers, they turned to the Disney folks for help.



Harriet Baskas
Travel writer

It’s not really such a goofy idea.

Walt Disney Co.’s **Disney Institute** is well known for the customer service training it provides to government agencies, major corporations and organizations of all sizes. Miami International Airport, serving more than 32.5 million passengers a year, is the first airport to sign up.

“The airport experience can be magic or tragic,” says Bruce Jones, programming director for Disney Institute. “It boils down to how guests interact with your product.”

So far, 400 Miami airport employees have attended classes. Sixteen airport tenants, including retail and food vendors, plus airlines and a few government agencies have sent some of their people as well.

What have they learned? “That while not everything that goes wrong at the airport is our fault, it is our problem,” says Dickie Davis, the airport’s Customer Service Division director. “So it’s important to make a personal connection. If someone has lost their baggage, or can’t find their gate or the parking garage and encounters an employee who’s sympathetic and tries to help, it can take the edge off. It’s all about manners and niceness and courtesy.”

And perhaps a little bit about the outfits. Airport spokesman Greg Chin says travelers will be able to easily identify all those nice employees by their festive Florida-themed shirts with the airport’s large palm tree logo on the back. “We’re not a [theme park](#),” he says, “but we can take some of the Disney magic and put that here at the airport.”

Can a TSA-sponsored margarita bar be far behind?

Miami International isn’t the only airport trying to smooth out its image. Airports around the country are trying to ease the airport experience with amenities such as free Wi-Fi, live music, artwork and, in Cleveland, better cab service into town.

Starting around Thanksgiving, cab drivers at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport will become well-mannered “mobile ambassadors” for the airport and the city. Airport spokeswoman Pat Smith says there used to be a glut of cabs waiting outside the

airport and “some drivers didn’t really know their way around town.” Others would pick and choose passengers according to their destinations.

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Discuss: What should well-mannered airports offer?

The airport’s new cab service is modeled after those at Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshal Airport and other airports. All cabs are late models, equipped with cameras and GPS and must be kept clean and in good shape. Fares to downtown will increase, but they will be regulated and the drivers will be uniformed, trained in customer service and hospitality and armed with information about attractions and events in town. “When you come into the airport, we’re the first impression of Cleveland that you get,” Smith says. “We’re also the last. So we want to make sure both those impressions are as positive as can be.”

That seems to be the approach at the Fort Wayne International Airport. The airport has free wireless Internet access, a business center and a great aviation museum. And someone from the airport’s team of more

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than 70 volunteer Hospitality Hosts greets all arriving flights and offers each passenger a smile and a free locally-baked cookie.

Recently, the airport also began offering passengers complimentary shuttle service between the airport and the long-term and economy parking lots, even though “it really takes no more than a four or five minutes to walk to the terminal,” says Tory Richardson, the executive director of the Fort Wayne-Allen County Airport Authority.

Why spend the money to buy vans and hire staff to offer such a service? “We have an aging population and lots of business travelers. And on snowy, rainy or windy days, it’s just not a great walk,” says Richardson. “So it helps our airport stand out from the larger ones in the region. And it’s one more courtesy we can offer to passengers in terms of being customer friendly.”

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And, says Richardson, “In many cases, passengers don’t differentiate between the services of the airport and the airlines.” So if

someone gets delayed or stuck on an airplane for two hours the airport often ends up being blamed. “We want to be involved in doing what we can to assist passengers.”

Especially, I suspect, when it seems as if the airlines don’t really care to.

So can cookies, festive shirts, complimentary shuttle rides and an extra dose of “manners, niceness and courtesy” make up for long lines, overpriced food, delayed departures and some of the other frustrations of modern day air travel?

It may depend on whether or not you're goofy enough to believe in magic.

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