

# MARY GOSTELOW

customer service and the media

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour, and a delight, for me to be here this afternoon to talk about three of my very favourite subjects - airlines, customer service and the media.

To start, it is obvious I am an airline nut. I am on the road about 300 days a year. I live two hours' drive from London Heathrow - my car's first home, it seems - and this last month, for instance, I did Kuala Lumpur, Milan, New York - and Hong Kong twice. I fly in all sections of the plane but what I do care strongly about is access to an airline lounge pre-departure.

And that lounge needs very few elements to keep me happy. I need lots of mineral water, proper coffee from a make it yourself machine rather than a brown liquid that has been stewing for hours. I need already-on computer monitors with instant connectivity to AOL, Yahoo and other main e-mail providers, and I need plenty of electric sockets.

All that is customer service, or should be. So why do so many traditional airlines not provide that kind of equipment? Have any of you flown the new SWISS, or TAP, out of Heathrow recently? Their lounges have no computers, there are no telephone links for you to dial up via your laptop, and the coffee tastes like yesterday's brew.

(Contrast this with Singapore Airlines' Raffles Class lounge at Singapore Changi, where there are dozens of computers, and an onsite technician, a variety of electric sockets and fabulous coffee and food for you to make any type of meal you want.)

Traditional airlines are missing a vital point. They are worried stiff about the terrifying new breed of low-cost and no-frills airlines, who market via their charismatic leader, say a Stelios or a Michael O'Leary. They stress their below-rock-bottom prices. They also sometimes admit that customer service is not part of their game plan.

So why aren't the airlines that HAVE been around for years letting customers and potential customers know that they are offering far more than merely transport?

Finally, it seems, one airline, British Airways, has got the message. A soft-sell advertisement dreamily invites you to wonder if there is an airline that flies you direct from and to near city centres rather than, for instance, an airport called Hahn that is 90 minutes' from Frankfurt. Don't you want an airline that does offer food and wine? Well there is one, British Airways.

Unfortunately I know, after nearly 25 years campaigning for customer service and food and wine to be pushed more to the front of the airline experience, that airlines simply do not want to use these as unique selling points. What if a six-hour flight is delayed five hours, as I experienced out of New York last month? How can customer service compensate for the frustration of that delay. What if a delayed plane means that the meal served onboard is now unsuitable for time of day?

The main reason, I suspect, is that airline chief financial officers see the whole customer service experience as a bottomless hole that absorbs money. And their marketing colleagues prefer stressing the hard-sells of new equipment, more leg room, new routes.

Perhaps the private jet sector is leading the way.

Los Angeles-based Air Royale International is not just an air charter company. It is also offering one-way on-demand flights across the USA at highly competitive prices. Take a seat in a 12-person Gulfstream from Los Angeles Van Nuys Airport to Teterboro NJ, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, and it will cost you only \$2,062.

Air Royale was started in 1994 by an avid aviation enthusiast, Wayne Rizzi. After getting his private pilot's licence when he was 16, he worked for various carriers, now all sadly only flying up in the heavenly clouds. He was manager of inflight services, in order, for Pacific East Airlines, for Air America, for MGM Grand Airways and he was director of sales and marketing for Premier Air.

Customer service, says Rizzi, is the key to the success of his airline.

Air Royale International assigns a dedicated representative, available 24 hours a day, to each client. How many other airlines offer that service to best customers?

It is not unusual in, say, the world of fine tailoring. Italian bespoke tailor Brioni knows that its customers today are driven by two needs - to acquire (and, amazingly, if the price of a Brioni suit goes up, so does demand) and to bond on a one-to-one basis. These people do not want mass customisation. So, every one of the top 15,000 Brioni clients worldwide has a personal concierge, who can be accessed from anywhere, any time. Even the president and ceo of Brioni, Umberto Angeloni, personally handles 100 top clients, all of whom have his private e-mail and his global GSM mobile phone numbers. After all, he says, customers are his best salesmen, and it is therefore essential to introduce them to another level of satisfaction.

One of the most fascinating books I have read recently is *Uncommon Practice: People Who Deliver a Great Brand Experience*, by teams from Interbrand and Forum. There are three airlines portrayed, EasyJet, Midway Express Airlines and Virgin.

One of the interviews in the Midway Express Airlines section is with the carrier's vp customer service Cliff Van Leuven. The difference in airlines today, he says, is in having employees who know what their company's brand is and what the promise is. When things are going badly, that is when customer service becomes even more important.

Van Leuven recounts the time when sudden turbulence caused a flight attendant to upset red wine on a business traveller's shirt. The flight was going from New York to Milwaukee. The captain called ahead to the Milwaukee station and explained the situation, roughly described the passenger's size, and then the Milwaukee agent took over. Someone was rushed to the nearest department store and when the plane arrived at Milwaukee, the passenger was met at the gate by a Midway Express Airlines agent offering him three shirts, with the airline's compliments.

How many times has that passenger, I wonder, retold that story? And if he was not already, before that incident, I am sure now he is not only loyal but thoroughly committed to that airline.

In my own experience, I remember flying Economy in Singapore Airlines many years ago. When one of the renowned Singapore Girls presented my meal tray, she took the foil off the main course dish, and said genuinely, and looking straight at me, that looks MARVELLOUS.

Customer service is not only spending lots of money on those customers, but is constantly thinking of them, and interacting with them.

Take check in. I hate long lines anywhere. Many top airlines have now instituted customer service agents to help feed passengers to vacant desks, especially for First and Business Class travellers. They have also realised that today's passengers want a choice of check-in options, but even those that should not require any human interaction still require a customer service agent to help explain how this particular self-check-in works.

British Airways international customer service is headed by departmental general manager Beverley Bennett . She and a colleague are evolving the airline's Passion for Service commitment that has now been running about four years. A customer service week from 7th to 11th October produced thousands of nominations for front line staff who provide outstanding service. Nominations came from satisfied passengers, and from airline employees recommending their peers. Finalists are going to be rewarded at a British Airways management meeting on 16th December.

And customer service only works if the airline looks after its internal customer. Does the gate agent hand the onboard purser the correct manifest at the right time? When the plane pulls up at its arrival gate is the person operating the airbridge jetway ready to swing into action (sadly, my own experience includes far too many instances of having to wait for someone to come along and connect the airbridge to the plane, which is extremely annoying for everyone else concerned and could well impact passengers' views of that entire flight).

The key, says Beverley Bennett at British Airways, is that customer service is no good unless it offers a consistent product, and that in turn requires connectivity, to ensure that every provider along the chain offers a similar product.

She is sure that airlines would do better to simplify their entire customer service product (perhaps the industry could begin to simplify by rethinking those terribly complicated printed tickets which give a surfeit of codes and section prices but which often omit to tell you which airport, let alone which terminal, you are leaving from).

The perfect customer service experience, from this passenger's point of view, starts when making the booking. If I am telephoning, I need someone to answer immediately, give me details of my reservation and locator number, and send the tickets or e-mail confirmation. If I am going online, I need a quick and simple site, without videos and confusion.

Has anyone else noticed that when booking Ryanair online you can sometimes get through to the final OK when the thing seems to freeze? You then have to phone, at surcharge, to check the reservation, which you then find did go through after all online.

You need the minimum of holdups on the way to the airport, you need no line when you get there. You must be able clearly to see monitors showing your flight's number, estimated and actual departure times, and gate number.

Of course you need security to be hassle-free. Frankly, until personal profiling comes into force, a lot of people are going to be inconvenienced.

I recently took five flights around the USA with one airline. Unfortunately it was a one-way schedule as I switched to another carrier for the return. The ticket was printed on day of departure of the first flight, and I do not have a US passport. All these factors brought up big red marks in the computer, as a result of which at every check-in I and my bag were subjected to extra security, and immediately before boarding I was taken to one side for a further detailed check.

It was Bob Crandall, now no longer with American Airlines, who dared to say in his own inimitable way that personal profiling MUST be brought in. But of course we know that is non-PC (not politically correct).

So, after going through security our happy passenger wants to find somewhere to sit while waiting for the flight. It is good to have the gate operative at least an hour ahead of boarding, and to have those people smiling. When boarding, there must be plenty of space in overhead bins for handbaggage storage.

In First or Business Class, flight attendants, smiling of course, should offer to take your coat, bring a newspaper, offer drinks. During the flight they must continue to smile.

And customer service definitely also extends to the cockpit. I was recently flying out of JFK and we were 35th in line for takeoff. We taxied around for over an hour and then had to go back to the gate to be refuelled. Did the captain say anything during that hour? Not a word. It was only when I, a humble passenger, asked a flight attendant what was happening that the captain announced - in a voice that was humorless and lacking any character - what was happening. He kept on saying it was for our safety. Later, when we had finally crossed the Atlantic and were just about to come in to land at Heathrow, the airshow map on the video screen showed us obviously circling round and round above the town of Bournemouth, far West of London. Did the captain say anything? No.

Passengers are not idiots and crew must not treat them as such. As dear old Pan Am always used to say, the more our passengers know what is going on, the more relaxed they feel. Absolutely correct.

Customer service to my mind, incidentally, does not mean expensive but unnecessary inflight amenity bags. Singapore Airlines has given them up so why shouldn't the entire industry follow suit? They are such a waste. Apart from the bags that both Air Canada and Virgin at one time used, bags that afterwards made nice evening shoulder bags or waist-held travel pouches, respectively, the holders themselves are useless afterwards. Inside, the contents seem to be in reverse order of the standing of the airline. The more old-fashioned the carrier, the more it wants to give passengers in the way of perfumes that will never be used.

Onboard, of course you want the food and drink you expected. It is always so annoying if there is a main course choice listed on the printed menu and they have run out of exactly the dish you wanted just before they got to you.

Good customer service on the food line is exemplified, in my eyes, by Malaysia Airlines Golden Class business product. All main meals start with their signature beef and chicken satays, served from a trolley. The main course

is also presented on a trolley, which means you can choose exactly what you like, say all vegetables, and also indicate how much you want. This is stylish and must save money and wastage.

I really do not mind plastic cutlery, but it must be strong. Malaysia Airlines has really sturdy full-sized green plastic knives and forks. By contrast, on the flight out of JFK that I have just referred to, I tried to cut through my excellent double lamb chops with one of American Airlines' flimsy no-colour knives and forks, and the shafts instantly snapped.

Customer service is lots of water, and access to snacks and fruit when you want it, not when the cabin crew feel like doing a service. Customer service is blankets that are not too hairy, and pillows that are not so small that they fall down between the seats.

I hate being woken up, in the morning, with a full blast of bright lights. Someone, somewhere, did a marvellous wake-up dawn chorus of bird song with light and pictures gradually brightening in the cabin and on the main cabin screens. I wish I could remember which airline that was.

On arrival, you do not want to be told that ground staff will now be happy to look after you unless they are. How often do you arrive to find no-one from the airline at all? You certainly need someone in airline uniform, and not merely a ground handling representative, in the baggage hall.

For premium passengers, nothing beats an arrivals lounge after overnight flights. At Heathrow, I really like the lounge facilities of Air Canada, British Airways and Virgin. In all these lounges, there are shower rooms with pressing facilities, and you can read this morning's papers while enjoying a leisurely breakfast and/or checking your email.

Of course you do not get all this with the no-frills carrier. EasyJet founder Stelios Haji-Ioannou recounts with pride how he charges customers extra if they return an EasyCar rented car dirty. His customers are supposed to return a car absolutely pristine. At the moment it is no-frills cabin crew, sometimes helped by cockpit crew, who do a lot of the tidying in planes. Fly Southwest and crew, sensibly dressed in Lacoste-type shorts and sneakers, parade up and down the aisle holding large plastic sacs for you, the passenger, to deposit your litter.

If the cost-cutting demands of the highly competitive no-frills sector continue to bite, it may not be long before an airline asks its passengers to clean the planes more thoroughly before they leave.

This is not what the traditional carriers will, I suspect, ever do unless in case of last resort.

Another reason, I say, that those airlines should stress that THEY have competitive edge in offering customer service.

Now, finally, how can the media help in all this?

Many years ago the press had good personal relationships with one or two key people in an airline's PR department. Then bureaucracy reared its head and today the relationships are in the main much more impersonal. It is almost easier for a journalist in Hong Kong to have a good relationship with SWISS than for someone in that airline's base country. Much of the work of PR, too, is now handed out to outside companies who have to justify every telephone call, every contact.

As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult for journalists to get the flights they need to write about a product.

Sometimes, of course, an airline makes a mistake. No names mentioned, but the last press trip I went on - about 15 years ago - also consisted of half a dozen media who were far more interested in the all-night bars at our destination. They stayed up for a full 48 hours before our return flight, which meant they slept their way back to Europe and knew nothing of the flight. And it was the airline, not the destination tourist board, that had sponsored the trip.

I want to put a strong plea to airlines to realise that good relationships with the right journalists help their marketing budget. Get a good story and it saves a lot of expensive advertising.

Some airlines have it right. I get extremely good business information, on a regular basis, from Air France, Cathay, Lufthansa, SWISS and United. I also get outstanding information from an outside company, Emerald PR

in the UK, that represents a whole range of smaller carriers, including Eastern Airways - a UK domestic carrier, not to be confused with the much-missed Eastern Airlines - and Flybe.

On the soft-sell side, I get really useful material, say on food products and outstanding philanthropic initiatives from employees, from Cathay, SWISS and United.

But look at all the airlines out there! Here is a writer who has numerous outlets, in trade and consumer publications around the world, and yet only a handful of airlines bother to tell me what they are doing.

Oh yes, some of them say. You can find what you want on our website.

That is ridiculous. First of all I am travelling so much I do not have time to check websites on the offchance there might be something of interest. Next, many carriers' websites are far far too complicated. And, also, why SHOULD I do their work for them? If they want publicity for free, they should give it to me, not expect me to search for it.

What do I want? I want a single contact in an airline, who understands the kind of information that I need and provides it on a proactive basis. And that person should react quickly when I ask something.

Of course we all know that the bigger any operation, the less the productivity and efficiency. I hate it when e-mails between me and someone in an airline are copied to all and sundry.

Public relations is all about that second, key, word, relationships. If the airline industry got journalists on its side rather than fighting against them, the image of the industry would soften, and warm itself to customers generally.

I have heard airlines say too often that journalists only contact them when they want a free flight. They are therefore prejudiced when someone tries to initiate a relationship. A relationship is a two-way communication, and if the industry is ready to accept that, I guarantee that I am not the only media representative who would gladly work with the carriers to show they DO care.

And this is the way to send the message of customer service to the world at large.

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