

Ensuring Customers Aren't A Flight Risk

by Anna Wells, Editor, IMPO



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-Anna Wells

I find myself in airports quite a bit—the various demands of my job entail a moderate amount of travel, and some stretches are worse than others. While I've yet to meet a person who really enjoys airline travel, I've found myself particularly frustrated as of late.

On a recent trip, I was delayed on a layover because another flight was late, and there were several passengers that needed the same connection as I did. The airline ostensibly found our time less valuable than the money it would cost them to re-book these other passengers, so they held our plane for almost an hour and a half. I'm sure these passengers appreciated "catching" their connection—and I tried to think of them, really—but it was hard to curb my irritation with having to drive home at 1 am.

Only two weeks later, I arrived at the airport for a flight to Baltimore, and was told my reserved seat was no longer available, because we were in an "oversold situation." I was matter-of-factly told that I could purchase an upgrade to business class if I'd like, otherwise take my chances at the gate, but "no guarantees."

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I'm not sharing these anecdotes because I have a personal ax to grind (okay... maybe a little...) but more to serve as an indicator of a growing trend towards cost cutting measures. The new economy demands we make smarter choices—in the case of an airline, perhaps this means overselling flights to minimize empty seats—hedging your bets, so to speak.

While sometimes this seems like the most pragmatic approach, it sets a dangerous precedent to take these kinds of chances, when it's the customer who will ultimately pay. In manufacturing, it's perhaps tempting to also approach cost cutting in an aggressive way. Whether it's cutting quality through sourcing inexperienced labor, importing inferior parts, or running equipment longer than it should go before replacement, it's risky behavior—especially since it's the customer who likely contends with the consequences.

In my case, the airline is so focused on efficiency that it winds up being inefficient—and, far worse, alienating its customers. Often, one false move with a customer means an account is lost altogether.

Besides the risk of losing valuable customers, the trickle down costs will come back to the scene of the crime in the way of returns, cancellations, downtime—a company's worst nightmare.

Creative cost cutting is good—in fact, we should all be encouraged to think outside the box when responding to these less than stellar economic conditions. The important thing though, as always, is to remember the needs of your customers. Personally, I could show you a list of airlines I now refuse to fly, and will be the first to admit: a good customer relationship is something that is often much more difficult to build than to destroy. Don't let a focus on the bottom dollar cloud judgement, and potentially interfere with this critical investment.

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