



ONE AIRPORT, SAME EXCEPTIONAL LEVEL OF SERVICE

BY STEVE MAYERS, DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE FOR HARTSFIELD-JACKSON ATLANTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, AND NIVI NAGIEL, NCSA

As the world's busiest airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL) is the subject of a famous and often-heard Southern joke: "When you die, whether you're going to heaven or hell, you'll have to connect through Atlanta."

Home to the primary hub of Delta Air Lines, the world's largest hub, and mainline, regional, and cargo airlines, Hartsfield-Jackson hosts more than 2,500 arrivals and departures every day, connecting more than 150 U.S. destinations and 75 international destinations in 50 countries. Hosting 275,000 passengers a day, Hartsfield-Jackson in 2015 became the world's first airport to serve more than 100 million passengers in a single year—and the numbers are steadily rising.

But how does Georgia's largest employer—with more than 63,000 airline, ground transportation, concessionaire, security, federal government, City of Atlanta, and tenant employees—begin to unify such a diverse enterprise around its mission to "be the world's best airport by exceeding customer expectations"?

Steve Mayers, the Airport's director of customer experience, says it's no different than any other multidivisional organizational structure—all play a role in the company's overall goal.

"What we really have to do," Mayers says, "is find the influencers [of all organizations operating within ATL], bring them into a room and work to develop a philosophy for the entire enterprise."

This collaboratively reached core philosophy of Hartsfield-Jackson is, "One airport, same exceptional level of service."

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In the nearly two years since Mayers joined Hartsfield-Jackson, what started as the guest relations unit has evolved into a three-pronged customer experience department consisting of guest relations, ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), and volunteerism divisions.

With more than 20 years of hospitality experience and leadership positions in companies such as Sandals Resorts, Radisson, and Best Western, Mayers is keenly aware that the success of any organization boils down to its customer service. And for the more than 100 million annual customers of Hartsfield-Jackson, whether they are checking their bags, making their way through security, or ordering a pre-flight snack, “they only see one organization,” notes Mayers. Although Delta Air Lines, TSA, and Sweet Georgia’s Juke Joint are separately owned and operated, passengers perceive ATL to be singularly responsible for their experience.

As such, Mayers takes his role of unifying those 63,000 employees under a collective philosophy of service excellence as vital to the Airport’s overall success. Translating philosophy into a living, breathing practice begins with training. Hartsfield-Jackson has a contractual arrangement with every business within the facility establishing mandatory employee training in matters including customer service, human trafficking, and ADA.

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Furthermore, Hartsfield-Jackson has multifaceted rewards programs in place to encourage superior service, from an employee-of-the-month program to a yearly rewards celebration honoring 1,000 employees for their service excellence. For the annual function, Airport partners join to donate prizes, of which the grand prize is valued at \$4,000.

“People are very much aware of the value that they have in the enterprise,” Mayers says.

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The many faces of ATL’s employees all have one thing in common: They exude a mindset of true Southern hospitality.

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“one family, treating everyone as a guest. That’s what we’re about.”

The customer experience team also takes the opportunity to ask ATL employees about their perceptions and treatment at a number of touchpoints, including employee checkpoints, and about what improvements can be made. Measuring employee satisfaction at every touchpoint is essential because, as Mayers says, “They are our customers also. They’re our partners.”

In addition, in development is an educational program sponsored by the Airport to offer opportunities for young people to advance themselves. Enrolled employees will be given first preference when leadership positions become available, and some businesses have already signed on to participate.

Inclusive programs such as this are all part of a “holistic view of trying to help employees,” Mayers says. “Because even though they’re not our employees, we are one family. We’re investing in them so that they can make a contribution to us and help make us the best airport in the world.”

The result of these combined efforts is a culture of true Southern hospitality. Mindful that about two-thirds of ATL’s travelers are connecting and only there for an average of two hours, employees recognize themselves as community members—representatives of Hartsfield-Jackson and the city—collectively

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With more than 2,500 daily arrivals and departures carrying 275,000 passengers, the world’s busiest airport strives every day to also be the world’s best airport, by exceeding customer expectations.

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Ensuring your employees know their value in the organization translates to employees treating customers as their own guests.

responsible for providing an experience of “one family, treating everyone as a guest,” Mayers says. “That’s what we’re about.”

As for measuring the customer experience, Hartsfield-Jackson doesn’t squander a single opportunity. The Airport recently launched a QR code system for collecting feedback at every customer touchpoint, through which a customer can nominate a specific employee or give general feedback on services.

Additionally, users can submit comments on the Airport’s new website, atl.com, and include a Web comment form that will go directly to Mayers’ department. A social media team also monitors customer input on Twitter, Facebook, etc., and shares surveys that followers are invited to complete. Another channel is the ASQ (Airport Service Quality) survey, an in-depth evaluation conducted quarterly by Airports Council International.

Hartsfield-Jackson is also moving toward a system of instant surveys that would enable the onsite customer to deliver a comment immediately. If the customer chooses to leave her contact information, she would receive an immediate response and have the opportu-

nity to speak with a guest relations representative then and there.

This could potentially address and remedy any issues in the moment, before they escalate to social media or otherwise cause unnecessary damage to the Airport’s reputation. In short, Mayers says, “We are trying our very best to make sure that we get as much feedback as possible,” and that it is as easy and accessible to do wherever customers choose to provide it, whether by phone, the website, on Facebook, or onsite.

Of all the companies and agencies doing business within Hartsfield-Jackson, perhaps the most problematic for many passengers has been the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Last February, ATL’s general manager responded to passenger complaints about excessively long lines at security checkpoints—with 30- to 60-minute delays causing some to miss their flights—by writing to the TSA administrator, pleading for changes to improve wait times.

This ultimately resulted in additional staffing and the installation of “Smart Lanes,” automated lanes that reduce screening times by up to 30 percent. Mayers, however, feels that the government agency has been

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Whether you're going to heaven, hell, or any of the more than 225 worldly destinations, ATL and each of its 63,000 employees go the extra mile to make sure your connection is a pleasant one.

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unfairly demonized, often originating from misconceptions by passengers who are uneducated about the workings of the TSA and are, by necessity, not privy to security-sensitive information that may cause delays.

In addition, the Great Recession of 2008–09 resulted in fewer employees used to operate checkpoints. Mayers' response to these challenges has been a policy of personally taking phone calls daily from customers with TSA-related complaints, and continually educating himself on why issues arise, enabling him to quickly address problems and seek solutions.

For Mayers, a successful customer experience program runs on adhering to a test-retest philosophy every day, which is critical to ensuring that goals are being consistently met. And perhaps no less important

is a passion for all aspects of managing the customer experience.

"I love what I do," Mayers says, "because it's challenging every day. It seems like I have little or no control over everyone who operates within my business; however, I have so much influence, through my behavior and the behavior of my team, and I am totally responsible for their behavior from the perspective of our customers. That, to me, is challenging and exciting." ■

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