



Tom Murphy,
Director, Human
Resiliency Institute at
Fordham University

It's about the customer

Service specialist seeks to offer the airport industry a template for handling passenger (and worker) stress

By John F. Infanger, Editorial Director

Customer service has become a major focal point for airports, and Tom Murphy, director of the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham University, is one of the people leading the industry charge. As he states, "If aviation doesn't address its service issues, it's a liability for the industry."

Murphy has teamed up with the American Association of Airport Executives to create a customer service training template to help guide the effort at airports large and small. The program is undergoing a beta-test at three major airports.

A professional customer service trainer, Murphy has a relationship with the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey conducting training, particularly since 9/11. During a recent interview with *airport business*, Murphy shared his insights on the growing role of customer service at airports. Following are edited excerpts ...

On airports' acceptance regarding their growing customer service role ...

"There is a desire for airports to be proactive. A large part of it is driven by the fact that since deregulation and accelerating now since the recession, the carriers have been pulling back from the traditional role carriers played to provide service. If you think back a generation, service was the province of the airlines, and the airports did not play a large role.

"Increasingly, as the carriers are pulling away from the traditional role of providing service, you see airports faced with the choice to step in or create a situation where the customer's needs go begging. That's why we've found success, or receptivity, by airports to have us give them a program that they can use to fill that gap in service.

"Since the AAAE announcement, we've been working with LAX, Pittsburgh, and Manchester/Boston to create a model that ultimately can be expanded to airports across the country to give them the tools to play a lead role in service.

"We have tangible evidence of progress we've made, and there's a very specific thing we seek to do with this. It's not just a vague notion of helping airports provide service. Our approach is based on research coming out of Harvard that shows what customers want most in terms of service is someone who will care when things go wrong. The research says the customers will choose a business based on the quality of the product, the value/cost, and the brand image. They overwhelmingly will leave a business because someone doesn't care when something goes wrong."

On what the finished product for airports might become ...

"What we seek to do with the Resiliency Edge model has two parts to it. One is the Resiliency Edge training module, a two-hour module, to help employees manage their stress so they can stay focused on what customers want most — somebody to care when something goes wrong. So, the module is designed to give front-line personnel the tools to manage their pressures.

"We know the workers have pressures; we've done research that shows four out of five workers are feeling an overflow effect from the customers' stress. The workers are feeling stressed because the travelers are stressed.

"We've got four Resiliency Edge principles that we work with — adaptability; engagement; optimism; and proaction. We train them to be what we call N.I.C.E. — Neutralize Irritations Customers Experience. What

we recognize is that what a customer wants most is somebody to care when they have an irritation.

"The second is an incentive that follows up on being N.I.C.E. with the dots. We move beyond being nice and into problem-solving; teaching how to neutralize issues. The second part is we set up an incentive program; and do supervisor training to train them to be motivators and coaches. We work through the supervisors in part two to be agents to identify people applying the tools. The supervisors are trained to identify people who apply the lessons.

"We work with the local hospitality industry to give us prizes that we award to the people who are neutralizing the irritations, and problem-solving."

On reasons for teaming up with AAAE ...

"The beauty of working through AAAE is the next step — to work with them and utilize their technological capabilities so we can meet the needs of scale. We have the product at the institute; AAAE has the network and the ability for us to put this into a form that can meet the needs of scale.

"One of the keys is they have ability to offer webinars and have the ANTN closed-circuit television network; that will be a prime way. But if an airport wants somebody to come in, we'll train trainers directly for them.

"Whatever the airport customer wants, we'll meet their need."

On the Fordham University connection ...

"The other thing that Fordham provides is the researchers who can identify the new and evolving needs, and provide the input on how to quantify the impact on customer satisfaction and making workers more productive, even while

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“Our approach is based on research coming out of Harvard that shows what customers want.”
— Tom Murphy

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improving service. Fordham gives us that research capability.

On feedback from his original primary airport customer, the Port Authority of NY & NJ ...

“We’re hearing that the folks using the tools are benefitting from it. Ultimately the goal will be to expand the program. We started it in May 2008 at JFK as a way to establish the model.

“The proof in the pudding is how people are applying the tools and recording their successes. JFK has over 1,000 stories already on how they’ve been able to apply the tools on the website we provide.

“In our approach, a satisfied customer is somebody who had a problem and the worker used the tools to step up and solve the problem. We’re looking to go to the core of what customers want.”

On the growing importance of the need for good service ...

“I think all of this is integral to aviation maintaining its viability. The greatest challenge to aviation is if people stop flying, and people increasingly are going to have alternatives to getting on a plane. One is how technology is advancing — the ability to teleconference, which is getting cheaper for people to use. Airports need to step up and be proactive; if aviation doesn’t produce what customers want most, people will choose not to fly.

“It’s not just a question of drive or take a train, the real challenge will be technology comes cheap.”

On new steps airports are taking to meet the need ...

“I think airports are doing it. I’ve seen increasingly that airports are buying things like cots; I see them establishing relationships with concessionaires so they can have things like the diapers and baby formulas ready in advance. I do see proaction on the part of airport directors for that. I think the need is going to increase.”

On the impact of 9/11 on the service issue ...

“I think 9/11 has increased the anxieties for the travelers in terms of having to pass through a high security environment. The more the passengers get stressed — and 9/11 has created increased stressors — the more they displace those stresses on the workers. The workers must become more resilient to handle that stress.

“When you are resilient as a worker you now have an advantage over someone who hasn’t been given the tools to bounce back.

“The purpose to give them the tools is to keep focused on their key job — giving customers somebody who cares.”

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