

Customer Experience Two Incidents and One Lesson

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Two unsavory incidents took place in the airline industry ten thousand miles apart from each other. One incident took place in India where a customer beat up an airline staffer of Air India. In the second incident was in USA, the airline staff dragged out a passenger forcibly out of the air craft. One is the most advanced country in the world and the other is an example of an underdeveloped country trying to catch up.

The common aspect in these two incidents is that the customers surely were pissed badly. The Air India customer was the more powerful one and he beat up the staffer. There was a hue and cry with all news channels and newspapers making a lot of noise over the incident. As it happened the customer was a member of parliament and Air India was a government organization. So, the management could not do anything against the lawmaker. So, the affected staff member could speak on news channels and be satisfied. All the airlines in the country banned the lawmaker from their airlines in an informal manner. Then the customer went to the civil aviation ministry and put pressure on the airlines to lift the informal ban.

In the United Airlines incident, apparently, the airline was the more powerful one and the customer could not do much. But the incident was video recorded by someone and posted the pictures and the video on the social media and the news reporters on TV and other media had a field day.

In both the incidents, the social media like Facebook and Twitter went wild with posts and tweets saturating the visitors to the web with information and a lot of jokes were created and circulated.

While the Air India customer went practically unscathed, we cannot say the same thing about United Airlines. I am sure a few heads have rolled inside the company. I am sure that United Airlines must have carried out an incident-postmortem on the incident. I am not sure about such postmortems in Air India. Some internal investigations must have taken place or taking place right now in United Airlines and a few consultants must have been called in to finalize the strategy to repair the damage and restore the reputation to its original pristine quality. They will wait for the clamor to die out and then unleash the advertising strategy to restore the image. Some discounted pricing would be available to attract the oscillating prospective customers to swing in favor of flying with United airlines. All said and done, United Airlines is going to take a major financial hit this financial year. The incident may be forgiven but never forgotten.

What are the lessons for us to learn from these two incidents? One, we need to reassess our strategies for ensuring a satisfactory customer experience and re-engineer those strategies. Two, we need to re-evaluate the training we are imparting to the customer-facing staff and improve upon it. Three, we need to better monitor the experience of our customers and take corrective and preventive actions.

In this article, I would like to address the third lesson of better monitoring the customer experience. There is a general perception that monitoring is equal to breathing down the neck of the person performing the work. Certainly, not! Monitoring is at two levels. The first one is at the time of performing the work and the second one is analyzing the performance later on to uncover opportunities for improvement and then implementing those improvements.

I am sure that the airlines have in place the monitoring mechanism to monitor the performance while the work is underway. We must all agree that customer facing employees face a tough situation be it during the check-in or in the cabin. The monitoring is usually in the form of a supervisor who intervenes when the situation calls for to pacify the frayed tempers and to render justice to perceived injustices. The supervisors are usually those that have directly faced the customers in similar situations and put in a number of years successfully without losing temper frequently. In the United Airlines case, check in process obviously went well. Inside the cabin, the monitoring is performed by the senior stewardess who also shares some of the work. The conditions from the time the passenger boarded till the air craft takes off, the situation is usually tense. There will be jostling passengers moving along the aisle with their cabin baggage nudging the seated passengers, the luggage bins overflowing causing irritation to the passengers with cabin baggage unable to find space; the stewardesses moving back and forth in a hurried manner, to no purpose from the passenger's standpoint and so on. I too once faced the situation of being requested to give up my seat to another presumably more important customer. I agreed because they upgraded my class to the next level and the delay was about two hours. I was gently requested and the reason I was given was that I did not check in any luggage and that I was the lone passenger not part of any group. A fine lady came to my seat and politely explained the situation and made a request, on her knees, offering me incentives. In addition to upgrading my class, I was given access to their business class lounge!

Now let us come to the systemic level. Obviously, the United Airlines passenger was not treated in this manner. The fact that he resisted to the extent that prompted the staffers to drag him away in the unrestricted view of all other passengers and not caring to see if they are videotaping this interesting incident shows that the passenger was not given any incentives to part with his seat. I would go on a limb to state that the United Airlines does not have a defined and continuously improved process to handle overbooking incidents. If they had one, then it was not internalized in the staff. I have seen quite a few organizations that had a glorious process locked up in the filing cabinet of the head of the quality or someone who handles the process definition and improvement.

In the case of Air India, obviously, there was no monitoring while the work is being performed! If there was one, then the supervisor would have been the first to flee the scene terrified of the powerful passenger's ire!

I noticed that not many organizations take the measurement of

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customer satisfaction seriously. The usual practice of measuring the customer satisfaction is using the CSS (Customer Satisfaction Survey) form. The form is filled in by selected customers to select the choices given on various aspects. The staff carefully sift the passengers to fill the CSS form so that no adverse rating would come about. Usually, the ratings would be neutral or better. Rarely do bad ratings are given. Analyses carried out using these forms and decisions taken thereof would not be very credible. CSS is a formality and it is fulfilled. Some organizations use the complaints or lack of complaints as the measure of customer satisfaction. For them, lack of complaints indicates that the customers are satisfied. One other method is to monitor the bookings. If the bookings are not falling, then the customers are satisfied. These three methods are low in cost but are not reliable indicators of customer satisfaction.

I developed a more credible measure of ascertaining customer satisfaction CCSR (Composite Customer Satisfaction Rating) metric using data that is internal to the organization. I oriented it toward the software development industry but it can be used in other industries as well. The hallmark of this metric is that the data is internal; it can be gathered easily; it is free from bias; and therefore, it is reliable. While CSS gives how well we managed customer satisfaction CCSR details how actually we delivered on customer satisfaction. In service industry like the airlines, it is not adequate to manage the satisfaction of a few passengers that filled the CSS. We need to deliver customer satisfaction in these days of social media and email groups.

Now customer “experience” connotes more than customer “satisfaction”. But, we are not even ensuring that the customer is satisfied leave alone ensuring better customer experience. The airline industry is already affected with the security measures and the

restrictions on the items that can be carried in the luggage. Earlier people were traveling on airlines as a matter of prestige. Now the rigor of security like full body scanners and frisking are invading the privacy and dignity of the passengers. Now if people are traveling by air, it is out of compulsion. International travelers have to use airlines as there is no other alternative available for them. Domestic travelers use airlines only to save time. They are traveling on air only in emergencies. Air travel as a preferred mode of transport lost its glamour. Airlines are helpless when it comes to the matter of security and people are willing to put up with the inconvenience. But once they cross the security barrier, the experience of boarding the air craft, cabin service and deplaning have also become unpleasant to put it politely.

Unfortunately, the airlines have not carried out value analysis of their priorities and services. They chose to cut facilities and services to avoid increasing fares over the alternative of making it more pleasant to travel by air and increase fares. I am sure that air travelers would be glad to pay a little more to have better experience in travel than pay less and experience discomfort all the way!

When the pioneers begin a new industry or service, their objectives would be to stabilize the industry and help it grow. Then the steady phase ensues in which the practices of the industry are stabilized. Periodically, we need to reevaluate priorities and re-engineer our practices. If we don't, the industry would begin its descent into oblivion. Now the airline industry is at cross roads. The two incidents highlight this fact. Would the captains of the industry take cognizance of this fact and correct their course? Only time will tell and we have window seats to watch which way they go!

Oh! What is that one lesson I mentioned in the title? It is, we need to reassess and re-engineer our practices at regular intervals.