



SERVICE: THE DNA OF GLOBAL TOURISM GROWTH

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What is ‘service’? What really defines ‘service’?

What does it mean when it comes to serving the billions of local, regional and international travellers of the world? Especially at a time of year when the world’s travelling community seems to be on the move to be able to be with what, and who, is most important to them? Expectations of exceptional service delivery perfectly reflect expectations of Santa showing up exactly at midnight, everywhere, for everyone.

The term ‘service’ has become a part of the foundation of the tourism industry, the basis of moments of magic vs. those tragic. Service can therefore be considered the essential DNA of experience delivery. But is it trained? Or is it intuitive?

The bottom line when it comes to the business of travel & tourism: It is both.

At the heart of the experience of a destination, service is one of the greatest expressions of a destination’s hospitality, its identity, and importantly, its humanity. It is conveyed by default and design through its airlines, airports, hotels, resorts, restaurants, attractions, festivals and events, marketing and moments of local engagement. Styles of service may differ by culture, by country, by continent. However, within it exists the same sentiment: the desire to take care of another. It is personal, regardless of the professional situation in which it may appear.

TAKING THE HEARTBEAT OUT OF WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NATURALLY

So often, however, what should be natural, instinctive really, is unnaturally stripped of thought, of emotion, of meaning. Policies and manuals define the way to act as something else.

To see vividly the difference that service makes, simply try to travel through an airport from December 01st onward. As holiday cheer sets in, so too does travel chain chaos. Pressure points rapidly reveal themselves:

- Check-in desks
- Security checks
- Immigration kiosks
- Boarding gates

Pressure valves start to burst, emotions run high, patience levels drop. True colours are rapidly revealed, the most frequently seen being red. Why? Because systems, put under extreme pressure from jumps in traveller volumes, start to show their breaking points, triggering off those of passengers. Lines become longer, slower, tighter, more irritating, more unfriendly. In the case of airlines, by the time passengers finally board, their breaking points are near (if not already reached) making the coming together of a few hundred frustrated passengers an enormous

challenge for crew now responsible for their wellbeing for the next x number of hours. ‘Service’ suddenly takes on a whole new level of expectations, including decompression.

But it is in these moments where true colours also include shades of brilliant gold. One such carrier of such shared of brightness: Katherine Sian Williams, Cabin Crew and therefore service ambassador of British Airways. With Ground Services background, she has been only 6 months in the air, and yet her understanding of the meaning of ‘service’ reveals her being a blessing to the airline for the experience she delivers to passengers, and the example she sets for her colleagues.

To Williams, the definition of service is simple:

“It’s really about treating everybody with respect – you don’t know what goes on in their lives. Be kind.”

Even the more aggressive passengers get her sympathy.

“People are nasty because they have started off on a bad foot. You still have horrible, grumpy people. That you can’t change. But there is that feeling, the reality, that people have worked very hard, and are going further afield. There is a feeling of entitlement. I don’t blame them. They simply want to be cared for in a way that makes them feel their hard-earned money, and time, is being appreciated.”

Which means turning to one’s innate understanding of human nature, at the same time of being conscious of policy. At times when pressures are intensified, be it because of seasonal peaks or personal issues with individual passengers, to ‘serve’ is to read a situation and know that it is human contact that holds the solution, not company rhetoric.

But how can one maintain a personal touch when growth of the sector is demanding technology step in to accelerate systems? With over 4% growth in international travellers each year to exceed over 1.18 billion in 2014 (source: UNWTO), over 8 million travelling by air alone each and every day across almost 1400 commercial airlines (source: ATAG), how can one-to-one work for one-to-millions?

Williams insists that even the sector’s growth can accommodate the need to not forget the basics, emphatic when stating:

“This is a human nature thing. We need more human participation. What is happening is we, all parts of our lives, are becoming more and more automated. We are pushing the role of service to technology. I think that goes against what it means to care. For some reason, the belief is that unless you spend a lot of money, somehow you are losing the right to receive what should be service for all?”

The challenge as we look to the future, and the growth we know is happening, thankfully, in and for our sector?

“That is where I worry. How can we expect young people coming through to understand that service is simply about human care? They do care – they just don’t understand how to deliver it. They do not feel the responsibility to take passenger care personally.”

IT GOES BOTH WAYS

Still, as much as those in the industry, on the front line of service, may do their best, we must never forget that being about human engagement, it is a two-way affair. From a traveller perspective, being on the “*I paid for it*” receiving end is not a good reason for bad manners.

Someone, somewhere is working through the night, through timezones, through temper tantrums, for us. Someone, somewhere, is spending New Years Eve away from loved ones to be airside scanning bags to keep us safe, or up at 35,000ft serving us champagne to toast in the new year.

Whatever link of the travel chain we may focus on, at a time of year when we pause to count our blessings, may our ability, our opportunity, our right to travel be high on the list of things we are truly thankful for. And those who are part of the global network that make it happen smoothly, safely, with care and compassion, every single day, everywhere across our world.

And so, as the countdown to the end of 2016 nears, and we look to 2017 as a new calendar of ‘*where in the world next?*’, keep calm and carry on. We’ll all get there. Thankfully.

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