



Barb Kastens
Editor

Grace Under Pressure

Flying home from the AETA International Trade Fair in Baltimore at the beginning of August was not the worst travel experience I've had, but certainly not the best, either. I chose an itinerary that included a connection in Atlanta in order to stay within the budget I had set for my trip. The airline had overbooked both flights, as they are apt to do these days, to keep their planes as full as possible and their numbers in the black. Announcements were made at both of my gates, offering a free round-trip ticket anywhere the airline flew for anyone who volunteered to take a later flight. Between re-booking passengers and calming frayed nerves, gate attendants had their hands full.

As if they were reacting to the airline's problems and running for cover, the crew on my first plane didn't bother to welcome me aboard, and except for a hasty beverage service, were scarcely visible during the flight. The pilot had an inaudible, uncaring voice, and couldn't manage to keep his microphone from cutting in and out during his two short messages to the passengers. None of these things particularly endeared me further to the airline. I was actually rather annoyed and remember thinking that I need not bother taking it again.

My second flight could not have been more different, even though the same problems existed at the gate. Happy, smiling crew members welcomed me at the door and helped passengers find space for their belongings in the crowded overhead bins. Once the doors were closed, the pilot came over the intercom in a warm, reassuring voice, explaining where we were in line and how long it would be until takeoff. He then introduced his "best in the sky" crew, as he called them, by name. Once airborne, he came back on to let us know what our flight time would be, where we might encounter a few bumps and what kind of weather we could expect at our destination. The attendants came through with not one, but two beverage services and were available to help whenever necessary. 100 miles from our destination, the pilot once again gave a status report. The entire crew, including both pilots, stood at the door while passengers exited, thanking them and wishing them well. Not once did I think that they were anything but genuine. That helped soften the blow of the first flight, and made me think that perhaps I would try this airline again after all.

Imagine for a moment that this was a retail environment, and compare it to your business. What if a customer had an unfortunate experience in your parking lot and came into your store loaded for bear? Would your employees run for cover, like flight number one, or would they face adversity head on, killing them with kindness, like flight number two? Do you and your employees come across as caring about your customers, or does your "microphone" cut in and out, never really delivering your message? Do your employees go out of their way to make people feel welcome and reassure them that they are there to help, or do they offer hasty service and then disappear?

Whether you're an airline or a tack shop, in today's tough business environment, it's about providing exceptional, competitive service and making customers want to come back for more. It's about being warm, genuine and caring, qualities that are sometimes elusive these days. And it's about leaving them with a good feeling that anticipates, rather than dreads, their next visit. If you do those things with your business, you are almost guaranteed to ride out any storm.

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