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# WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

## Customer Service Success Stories

Steve Gillick

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01 MAY 2011: We know from experience that what we do, often comes back to either reward us or haunt us in the future. The popular expression is

“what goes around, comes around”. In other words, you are responsible for the results of your actions.



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And this is something that many customer service programs state implicitly but not explicitly and then when things go awry from the CRM (Customer Relationship Management) perspective, the individual or company (or agency) wonders how to get themselves out of the jam. Almost always, it is that 20-20 hindsight rule that comes to the fore with some wise person stating that “if we had done such and such before, then we would not be in this predicament”.

In the real world, shining examples of customer service seem to be fewer and far between. In the travel world they are rarely mentioned, which is a shame because there are many CRM heroes populating our profession. The reality? When people like something, they will tell their friends and acquaintances. When people don't like something, they will communicate this to anyone within listening range.

On a recent trip to Peru, I had some eye-opening customer service experience.

### **All Westins are not created equal**

The Westin Hotel in San Isidro, Lima, Peru is a first class hotel in every sense of the word but it took a few incidents to show me the extent of their attitude toward customer service.

We arrived in Lima from New York at 7:00 am and as it was a Sunday, we were at the hotel reception by 8:30 am. Our room was available but we were informed that there would be an early check-in fee. Excuse me? If the room is ready why would there be a fee for an early check in? This has got to be the only hotel in the world that charges for early check-ins. Well that's our policy sir. It is 50% of the room rate. We decided to check-in and deal with the cost issue later on.

Jump ahead to Day Two where breakfast was included with our room rate. The service was very slow and all the buffet foods were cold. We spoke with the food manager and left. When we arrived at our room, the Manager was on the phone apologizing for the food and the service and offering us a room service breakfast. At this point we were not interested. When we arrived back to the hotel later in the afternoon, there was a fruit and chocolate plate along with a letter of apology from the hotel.

When convenience dictated that we eat lunch at the restaurant a few days later, the manager approached us at the end of the meal and informed us that there would be no charge due to the inconvenience we had suffered four days prior.

The very fact that the manager remembered us, paid attention to our comments and went out of his way to ensure a happy conclusion to the matter was more than enough to win us over.

We were in Peru for the ASTA International Destination Expo and at the conclusion of the event we made arrangements to participate on a Fam trip to the Northern Kingdoms, and afterwards check into the Westin for our final night in the country. Due to some flight interruptions (see below) we would not be able to check in to the hotel as planned. I telephoned the hotel long distance to explain the situation. They noted that with a guaranteed reservation the room was non refundable - which was totally understandable, but I mentioned that my flight to Toronto was at midnight the next night and asked if there was a possibility of allowing me a 7:00 pm check out (once I finally arrived back in Lima) so we could enjoy our last day, or what would be left of it, in Lima. They said they would call me back at 9:00 pm with an answer.

At 9:00 pm sharp, the hotel called and said “Due to your concern that you were charged for an early check in (10 days ago) we would like you to leave the country with a positive impression of our hotel and therefore we will allow you to check out at 7:00 pm tomorrow”. We were elated! As it was we did not arrive back at the hotel until 2:00 pm the next day ♦ so in fact we had all of five hours to ‘relax’ before heading back to the airport. But those five hours were precious.

And what shone brightly in all this was the CRM ♦ the management of customer wishes and complaints and comments, and the earnest effort of the hotel to accentuate the positive and

eliminate the negative. They certainly did this for me and I will definitely stay at the Westin on my next trip to Lima, as well as recommend the property to my friends and colleagues.

### **All Airlines are not created equal**

For the Fam trips booked before and after the ASTA Conference, our agent recommended TACA Airlines. We booked four flights and were quite happy with the schedules and the service. Then it happened. Our fourth and last flight was scheduled to depart Trujillo at 5:20 pm. This would allow us to return to Lima, check into our upgraded room at the Westin, have dinner at Huaca Pucllana, our favourite restaurant, and then spend the next day wandering the area and relaxing before heading to the airport for the flight to Toronto.

At exactly 5:20 pm, the flight was cancelled. The line up to re-book was angry, pushy and disorganized. We were shuttled to a 1-2 star property as part of the compensation for the cancelled flight but we left without even checking in, to stay at a better property downtown. The next morning we arrived at the airport at 7:00 am, only to be told that the 8:30 am flight on which we had been re-booked, was cancelled. We finally left Trujillo at 11:30 am, which saw us checking into the Westin at 2:00 pm (see above).

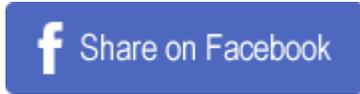
While others were fuming mad (and I will not say that we weren't annoyed) I thought that the priority was to deal with the immediate issues (where to sleep in Trujillo; to finally have dinner, to get a taxi back to the airport) and worry about money matters later. So when I returned to Toronto, I sent an email to TACA with all the

details and the proper documentation to back up my claim for a refund of out-of-pocket expenses). Within days, TACA approved the refund and 72 hours later the amount was back on my credit card.

Unbelievable! I was prepared for an outright rejection, followed by a lot of back and forth posturing between myself and the airline, but I guess the lesson was two-fold. Firstly, handle the matter in a mature, objective, respectable, courteous and timely fashion and secondly, don't underestimate the CRM mandate of the airline, or for that matter, don't stereotype all airlines as being unsympathetic to customer complaints. Indeed all airlines are not created equal.

Both the Westin Lima and TACA Airlines are great examples of customer service, and my own reaction to their CRM is a good example of how customer service can win over a dissatisfied client. What goes around comes around? You bet. I am looking forward to flying TACA on my next business and personal travels in South and Central America, and I will be staying at the Westin. Both companies proved themselves to be heroes when it comes to customer service.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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