

The SERVICE Sweet SPOT

By Claire Cole

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*Concessionaires Blend Technology, Human Touch
In Hopes Of Optimal Customer Satisfaction*
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Retailers' technology investments have lead to a better in-store experience for consumers, with overall in-store shopper satisfaction up 23 percent between 2008 and 2014, according to the 2014 Motorola Solutions Shopping Study.

The study also notes that nearly half of surveyed shoppers agree that they have a better experience when sales associates use the latest technologies to assist them.

"Retailers have better equipped their stores and associates with technology in a meaningful way during the last six years, resulting in a better shopping experience

and a significant leap in in-store shopper satisfaction," says Eduardo Conrado, senior vice president of marketing and IT at **Motorola Solutions**. "By enabling more associates with technology and offering self-service shopping options, retailers are not only increasing sales but driving greater customer satisfaction."

The trend toward technology is, of course, happening in airport retail as well as in "street" retail locations. Most of the major concessions companies have adopted technologies designed to enhance customer service.

But amid the technological advances, a

couple of key dilemmas arise: How far can technology go in delivering the excellent customer service and memorable experiences that consumers expect? And what role does human interaction play in such a digital-focused world?

Like many aspects of customer service, there is no one simple answer. Finding that sweet spot between technology and human interaction depends on many variables. It comes down to knowing customers and what they expect.

"They want to know what's special and personal," says Lise D'Andrea, president

Lise D'Andrea, president and CEO of Customer Service Experts, says despite advances in technology, person-to-person interactions will continue to be a vital part of customer service.



In partnership with United Airlines, OTG Management will allow guests to pay for food and retail items with frequent-flier miles.

Delaware North employees take part in training for the GuestPath program, the company's internal process for delivering customer service.



and CEO of **Customer Service Experts Inc.** She points out how the Internet and technology allow travelers to do their research before they even step foot in the airport. "They're more aware of how they'll spend their dwell time. They'll plan how they'll spend that time."

In the age of smartphones and free Wi-Fi, people are able to research ahead of time to see what the airport offers and plan accordingly. By the time they're in the terminal, they know what kind of experience they want.

And as it turns out, the interaction with real people, not just technology, still plays a large role in providing excellent customer service.

"The people part is still a primary part of the experience," says D'Andrea.

She explains that by being friendly, warm, upbeat and engaging, human associates can ease passenger anxiety and

stress, as well as increase revenue.

It's a subtle balance – the efficiency and speed of technology with the warmth and familiarity of real associates – and it's one that many of the prominent airport concessionaires are trying to strike.

The Technology

The iPad is perhaps the most ubiquitous, or at least the most visible, of technologies currently in place in airport concessions. **OTG Management**, one of the earliest adopters, has iPads stationed at seats and tables within its concepts. And the company isn't shying away from the tool any time soon. OTG's newest project, **Newark Liberty International (EWR) Terminal C**, will involve the rollout of thousands more iPads featuring the company's Flo system.

"It's really a powerful tool that really engages the customer and opens up a whole

new level of customer service," says Justin Blatstein, director of aura for OTG.

The iPads in Terminal C will be able to track customers' flights, present food menus in 20 languages, allow travelers to order duty-free and retail items to be delivered and, as part a partnership with **United Airlines**, pay for everything with frequent-flier miles.

HMSHost Corp. also is integrating iPads into its customer service strategy, but the company is focusing more on placing the technology in the hands of its associates rather than the customers. Servers use an iPad to present the menu and take orders from guests, and those orders will be sent instantly from the iPad to the kitchen, allowing the server to stay on the floor throughout the entire dining experience. According to Jeff Yablun, executive vice president and chief commercial officer for HMSHost, it's a hybrid solution that gives travelers the best of both



A major part of Paradies' customer service strategy is understanding and meeting the needs of its consumers; one official called service the company's "secret sauce."

technology and service.

But iPads aren't the only tech tool with which concessionaires are experimenting. **Delaware North** is exploring mobile platforms that could benefit customers; it has a mobile application called Taking Off with the Hungry Traveler, which allows customers to order food from its Anchor Bar at **Buffalo Niagara International** (BUF), pay within the app and schedule the pick-up time for their food.

The People

Just like investing in new gadgets, companies are also devoting time and effort to effectively train employees in this new customer service landscape. Many companies are focused on creating specific processes and task forces to ensure associates are performing at the highest levels.

Areas USA has created what it calls its Sales Generation Project, which is targeted at creating true salespeople out of its employees. The project hits hard on education and going deeper into the food offered by Areas' concepts: how to prepare the dishes correctly, the history of certain items and recommendations between options. The knowledge the project imparts to associates creates higher morale and highly engaged employees says Cary Self, senior manager of training and guest service.

Hudson Group echoes the need for salespeople to be knowledgeable about the products they're selling.

"With the opening of our new Hudson brand and the continued expansion of our

specialty brands, it has been increasingly important that associates receive product-knowledge training so that they are able to provide accurate and knowledgeable information regarding the products we sell," says Gary McBrayer, director of customer service.

There are five major goals and segments in Delaware North's GuestPath service-management program: setting clear standards of performance, providing proper training and education, measuring the success of its policies, rewarding and recognizing good practices, and improving any gaps that are found.

Bradly Sax, corporate director of GuestPath, says the company has created special groups and pages for employees on social media. For example, there is a Facebook page to which only employees have access. It offers a forum to post recognitions and awards, has activities for staff members and allows employees to see what other segments of Delaware North are doing around the world.

HMSHost's program, Serve, Sell and Exceed, focuses on the success of each person, not growing the business or the company being successful, says Yablun. The hope is, with programs like this, employees will be successful, in turn creating value for the company.

"The challenge is continuing to motivate and inspire our associates," he says.

The Feedback

None of this matters, however, without

companies tracking feedback and results. New technology has given companies a host of new ways to find out what customers are thinking: Mystery shopping programs, online surveys and social media are all contributing to the information concessionaires are receiving.

"A blended approach to feedback, including mystery shopping, is always something we recommend," says D'Andrea.

With all of the options available, companies shouldn't be relying on one channel of communication, she says.

Mystery shopping, although an older method, is still a common tool throughout the industry. Companies have started tailoring the programs to their specific needs and standards. HMSHost and Areas, for example, have set up processes that base mystery shopping questions on the exact training associates received.

Social media is also playing a key role in how concessionaires field questions and concerns from customers.

"Social media isn't just becoming a channel, it's already evolved into the main format for consumer communication," says Michael Pietryka, director of marketing for **Paradies**.

All of the aforementioned companies have a presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. A quick scroll through their accounts, especially those on Twitter, shows the increasing trend of consumers giving feedback.

Regardless of whether the comments and information coming in are positive or negative, the response is key.

"It needs to be brought together, analyzed and then something needs to be done with it," says D'Andrea.

The social team at Hudson does this through proactive and reactive strategies.

"Proactively, we track brand mentions and hashtag mentions and deliver personalized replies to issues and customers," says Daniel Vahab, manager of social media. "Reactively, we respond to mentions and direct messages from customers as they come in."

He says that when the situation calls for it, his team will alert the operations team and the respective department to ensure that any problems are being presented to those with the ability to fix them.

It all comes down to taking the feedback, whatever its form, and providing real results and change for customers, D'Andrea says.

"All types of feedback are good," she points out. ■

We'd like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Claire Cole at claire@airportrevenueews.com.