

# Customer Service at Airports: Has Technology Solved All the Issues?

By Chance Management Advisors' Fliers, Parkers and Complainers

Traveling a lot means a person spends substantial time in airports. Several experiences during recent trips made us reconsider the nature of customer service in airport parking facilities – particularly as technology changes the nature of the “paying” experience, but not necessarily the “being there” experience.

## Where the Heck am I?

Driving to and parking in an unfamiliar airport, or even infrequently at a familiar airport, can be a dizzying experience. Following the correct road to parking, finding the right parking facility for the terminal, and figuring out where you are after circling the ramps and bays are enough to raise your blood pressure – and that's before you consider the drivers you are competing with for the “king of the bumper cars” title!

Wayfinding to parking at airports is often not attuned to the needs of the drivers who are looking for parking. Fancy designs and expedient sign locations have often won out over basic information provided before the driver's critical decision points. Looking at the wayfinding as if you were a stranger – or having critiques of your wayfinding by those unfamiliar with the airport – will reveal many of the improvements you could make.

## A Needle in a Haystack?

Before the advent of space counting and inventory management systems, it used to be difficult to find an available parking space in a crowded airport garage or surface lot. Breaking News: It still can be! When electronic displays indicating available spaces counts are not positioned sufficiently before drivers have had to commit to a garage, entry lane or turn, what good are they?

The point is, if you're spending a ton of money on equipment and displays that provide great information, be sure to consider the proper placement of that equipment to really optimize driver convenience and information. When information can be obtained only too late to make a difference, the customer experience really suffers, and you're not getting the most from your investment.

## You Can't Get There From Here!

Even after you've packed your bags, made your way to the airport parking garage, and found an available parking space, your journey is far from over. At many airports, the most difficult part of your trip can be finding yourself in an endless parking garage, schlepping your bags in search of any sign that would point you toward the terminal or an elevator.

Even when present, these pedestrian signs tend to be significantly undersized and entirely too few and far between, leading you to search back and forth in frustration for the elevator, skybridge, walkway, etc. Does your airport garage make it easy for customers to find their way from their vehicles to their departure terminal? Do you have any “You Are Here” maps that give a person a sense of perspective on where they are in the airport maze?



## Cleanliness Is Next to What?

We've all heard the bromide, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” What's your airport parking facility next to? (And we're not talking about the municipal landfill.) When is the last time you've been able to touch a door handle or elevator button in a parking facility – airport or not – and not wished you'd carried your can of Lysol with you?

If your customers suggest that latex gloves be dispensed from the ticket-spitter, you know you have some cleaning to do. But seriously, a dirty surface lot or garage leaves a bad impression, implies that you don't care about your customers or your business, and hardly contributes to a sense of safety and security.

## Security

We're not talking about mandating full-body scans or pat-downs to enter your airport parking facility, but neither should your parking customers feel as if they're walking down the darkest alley in the toughest part of town.

Do you have emergency phones or intercoms, are there enough of them, and are they easy to find? If you have security cameras, are they actually working? And are they being monitored and recorded? What about your lighting? How often are your lights inspected for proper operation, and are your standards for replacement adequate?

## Dude, Where's My Car?

We would presume (hope?) that row/space, floor and garage information cards are available at all elevators and pedestrian exits, at a minimum. But John and Jane Q. Flier might just have forgotten to take one in their desperate dash to the ticket counter before their long and harried business trip.

And in larger airports, it's not uncommon to depart from one terminal and arrive at another. So, are phone numbers to the garage operations center conveniently and frequently posted to help the sorry sap who's misplaced the family car? Placing the number on the back of the ticket that typically has been left in the vehicle is not much help. Place it numerous times in locations that correspond to where the “light dawns” for the driver that he has no idea where the car is parked.

## No Way Out

In his play "No Exit," 20th-century French playwright-philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre concludes with a declaration that "hell is other people!" Were he alive today, he might say, "Hell is not being able to find your way out of an airport parking garage" - especially late at night when all you want to do is get home.

Our chief gripes? Poorly placed exit signs, insufficient reinforcement signs to keep one on the path to the exit and best of all, the "disappearing exit" that has no signs leading to it! The driver's resulting frustration can be taken out on cashiers (if there are any) or other motorists, and can lead to driving opposite to the proper traffic flow, slowed circulation and backing-up in drive aisles out of sheer desperation.

## I Owe How Much?

You found your car, now where do you go to pay, and with what? Signs instructing individuals to take their tickets to the pay-on-foot (POF) machine cannot be overdone. How many of us really take our tickets with us? Really? If drivers are not used to this type of payment, tickets will remain inside the vehicle until the person comes to the unpleasant conclusion that he or she must take the ticket back to a payment machine before leaving the garage.

Locating the POF machines in places that cannot be avoided is a good strategy. Credit card in / credit card out is wonderful, unless a person forgets which card was used on entry. Reminding individuals at the entry gate that they must pay with the same credit card on exit can save time and frustration while checking out. (Speaking of saving time, give drivers advance notice that they can pay by credit card so they don't hold everyone up while hunting for the card.)

## Change = Disruption

In major parking facilities, dealing with change is inevitable. Equipment has to be repaired, lanes have to be closed for repaving, exits have to be changed temporarily. The list is endless. But where do you tell drivers about these changes? Not 5 feet before the actual locations. Consider all the places that the drivers have to make decisions, and give them information at those locations. Figure out the first place that the information would be useful, and start from there with readable, temporary signs.

## How Do You Compare to the Competition?

If your parking facility is confusing, dirty, inconvenient for paying, rather dark and uninviting, you are in danger of losing your business to your competition, which may offer curbside drop-off and pickup, valet service with an individual's vehicle, plus coffee, the newspaper, and someone who has figured out that manners and a smile are related to job security.

A convenient parking space with an unpleasant and frustrating process may come in second to a more distant (and frequently less expensive) parking place with a better experience. How does your experience compare, and what are your customers telling you - assuming you are asking?

These are our Top 10 on the "hit parade" of bad airport parking experiences. When is the last time you asked your customers about their experiences?

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