

Miami International Airport Jets to Success with Help from *Disney Institute*

CHALLENGE

Miami International Airport (MIA) wanted to improve capacity and customer service while controlling costs and increasing satisfaction among its more than 35,000 employees.

DISNEY INSTITUTE SOLUTION

Disney Institute developed a custom, private program for MIA airport facilities employees and managers. In the program delivered at *Walt Disney World* Resort, participants learned how to use Disney's Approach to Quality Service to improve the way each employee interacted with airport guests.

After the program, the MIA team developed a holistic approach to customer service—a fifteen-point program called "Concierge MIA." Based on Disney best practices, the program established new standards for uniforms, training, service and physical environment. The program also empowered employees to help improve the customer experience.

RESULTS

MIA rose to sixth place in a nationally-recognized customer satisfaction study after being ranked 14th the year prior. It was the only large airport to show improvement.

THE FULL STORY

In the mid-1980s, Jose Abreu arrived at the *Walt Disney World* Resort with friends and relatives. His mission? Keep track of the tickets. His mistake? He lost them.

"I didn't know where I lost them," Abreu explained. "Somewhere between the van and the room, I think. It was just devastating! It was a major investment and I was upset and everyone was in a panic. I didn't know what to do."

That was the bad news. The good news, of course, is that Abreu was at a Disney Destination. He found a Cast

Member (employee) and explained his dilemma. After researching the situation and tracking down the details, she returned to Abreu with a surprise.

"She replaced our tickets!" he said, still impressed more than two decades later. "I couldn't believe how easy the process was!"

Abreu's tragic moment was transformed into a 'magic moment'—something he remembered years later when he became director of Miami International Airport (MIA).

Abreu wished to see the Disney level of customer service implemented at MIA, where studies showed the airport's customer service needed a boost.

"It was a matter of survival for us," stated Abreu. "It was just that simple. And from my own experience, I believe that Disney knows better than anyone how you can become a world-class organization."

“It was a matter of survival for us. It was just that simple. And from my own experience, I believe that Disney knows better than anyone how you can become a world-class organization.”

Abreu appointed Dickie Davis, Division Director of Terminal Operations & Customer Service, as the "CEO" of the customer service initiative. Davis was anxious to increase morale and enhance and improve customer service, but she recognized that challenges lay ahead.

"A customer tends to equate an airport with their airline experience," she explained. "If they get bumped by an airline in Atlanta, they'll say, 'I'm never flying through Atlanta again!' If O'Hare is snowed in, they don't want to go back to Chicago even though O'Hare didn't have anything to do with it."

“We can’t always help, but we can do some things to mitigate the circumstances.”

After some discussions, Abreu, Davis, and other MIA officials agreed that they would seek the expertise of a company they knew had a proven reputation for exceptional customer service: *Disney Institute*.

Disney Institute facilitator Rob Morton landed at MIA in July 2007 for a one-day program focused on quality service. The program, which was for the facility’s senior leaders, introduced the Disney Approach and the “Chain of Excellence” model. Morton discussed how leadership excellence affects cast excellence, which, in turn, enhances Guest satisfaction and then leads to business results.

Morton asked members of the group to explore ways that they could eliminate or mitigate barriers to providing exceptional customer service. They were tasked with developing a shared purpose to create consistency among vendors. Morton also introduced the Service Matrix, a business tool which made a resounding impact.

“The Service Matrix helps observe and identify service issues at a much greater level of detail,” Morton explained. “At Walt Disney World, this tool includes service delivery systems—our Cast, our human resources; the setting, which is the physical or virtual environment; and the process.”

“A key message that came out of this first engagement,” said Morton, “was the idea that ‘it may not be our fault, but it is our problem.’ The concept is that everyone is responsible and accountable for the passenger experience.”

Within months, Abreu, Davis, and several other MIA officials traveled to *Walt Disney World*® Resort in Orlando to see firsthand how Disney conducts training and applies its strategies to the design and delivery of the Guest experience.

“We recognized that, like us, Disney was running a complete city—a busy city—and we wanted to know ‘How do they make it happen?’” Davis said.

MIA officials were anxious to develop solutions that could work for everyone—employees and passengers—which was a challenge considering the myriad cultural backgrounds of both groups.

“Some passengers have never ridden an escalator before,” said Davis. “They’re out of their element and they are afraid. We deal with various cultures, languages and expectations. Our job is to be alert, sensitive and caring to everyone who comes through our airport.”

The team at MIA developed a holistic approach to customer service—a fifteen point program called “Concierge MIA.” The program embraces the principles that uniforms, training, service and physical environment all communicate quality. This program revamped many practices—from how restrooms are cleaned to how Aviation Department staff is uniformed.

“Our terminal operators are now trained to recognize body language—the pausing, hesitation, head scratching, etc.—that tells them that someone is lost or needs help,” said Davis.

MIA leadership also learned to look for influencers among the front line teams to include in the process, and to consider how positive behaviors could be reinforced through recognition.

Davis said the tools from Disney’s Approach to Quality Service helped her recognize that everyone can do something to improve the customer experience.

“A customer wrote us and was upset about a number of things,” recalls Davis. “So, I placed a call, and he was shocked that I personally called him back.

“We take the time to look at each issue, fix what we can, and follow up with passengers, so they are clear that we’re interested in what they have to say. Certainly, that’s something Disney does well. They focus on the small details—the details that matter—and that makes a difference.”

“Certainly, that’s something Disney does well. They focus on the small details—the details that matter—and that makes a difference.”