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Training provides employees with essential tools and techniques to provide excellent customer service

Words | **Kirstie Pickering**

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s with many industries, business aviation cannot excel without happy customers, making delivering a high level of customer service integral to operations. The scope of what good customer service looks like has changed in recent years as passenger demands and expectations have altered. So in 2023, what exactly is good customer service?

“It’s all in the details,” says Roman Mendez, general manager at Desert Jet Center. “Every interaction with a guest needs to be personalized in order to meet and exceed their expectations.

“Taking a genuine interest in learning who they are and what they like will allow you the opportunity to connect and provide a memorable experience. A happy customer is the best indicator of customer service at its finest.”



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Internal vs outsourced

When it comes to customer service, Desert Jet Center trains its team to focus on three elements when handling a situation: to keep a positive attitude, to be willing to listen and understand an issue, and to empower them to make decisions.

“My recommendation is to provide recurrent training on a frequent basis,” says Mendez. “There is always more to learn and it will prevent complacency.”

That training can come in two main forms – internal and outsourced. Many operators choose to keep training internal so they can control the narrative of what their customer service experience looks like, while others will choose the external route to address the wider themes of customer service from an unbiased provider.

Rucsandra Mihai is the founder and manager of Train Aviation and a certified business aviation trainer. She lists direct control, customized content, alignment with company culture, flexibility, and internal expertise as advantages of conducting training in-house.

On the other hand, she cites the disadvantages are that in-house training can be resource intensive, and internal staff may lack external perspectives and have limited expertise and biases.

“In-house training offers customization and cost control, while outsourced training provides specialized expertise and a fresh perspective,” says Mihai. “A hybrid approach, combining in-house and outsourced training elements, can also be considered to strike a balance between the pros and cons of each approach.”

Mihai commends outsourced training for its expertise, fresh perspectives, potential cost-effectiveness, and variety. But he acknowledges there are cons too, like less control, the time required for vendor selection, scheduling challenges, costs or potential employee discomfort.

“Despite these cons, outsourced training can still be highly valuable – especially when you find the right vendor that specializes in the business aviation industry and can provide high quality, relevant, and cost-effective training solutions,” says Mihai.

“It’s essential to weigh the pros and cons based on your organization’s specific needs, resources, goals and priorities when deciding whether to opt for in-house or outsourced customer service training.”

Navigating difficult scenarios

Philipp Klaus is a professor of customer experience strategy and management at the University of Monaco and the



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Above: **Service training
should extend to all
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author of the study “Come fly with me: exploring the private aviation customer experience”, which was published last year.

Klaus cites the most significant finding from his study as being how ultra-high-net-worth individuals (UHNWI) and high-net-worth individual (HNWI) choose their private aviation provider. First and foremost is their personal interactions with the brand representative – not the price. This highlights the importance of excellent customer service to retain customers.

This is particularly important when dealing with difficult scenarios that could leave customers feeling unhappy, unwilling to return to your business, or even recommending peers to stay away from your operation.

“Customer-facing personnel are crucial for how customers perceive your offerings,” says Klaus. “Regrettably, this is not often reflected in terms of their pay, career, training and development.”

“The most important skill in difficult scenarios is emotional intelligence. At the International University of Monaco, we develop individual solutions with our executive education clients to train customer-facing personnel in this challenging, but most important skill.”

This is an approach shared by Corporate Flight Training (CFT), a UK-based aviation training organization and aviation consultancy. Yasmin Milner, director at the company, says she believes that crew and flight attendants should be trained to deal with any situation that may arise during a flight.

Its leadership and conflict management course is designed to empower and give confidence to flight attendants to resolve difficult situations with clients that may arise when flying.

“At CFT, we believe that a flight attendant should be equipped with the necessary training to confidently deal with



Above: High levels of customer service often results in return business

any situation or incidents on board either safety or service related," says Milner.

"Retraining is a must to stay informed and learn new skills and ideas. The industry is extremely competitive for flight attendants, so being able to illustrate commitment to the role will set them apart.

"Even veterans in the industry retrain to keep their skills and knowledge fresh to enhance the guests' experience onboard."

Common mistakes

Ignoring the need for consistent retraining is a mistake often made when it comes to customer service in any industry. Companies often think that the initial round of training after hiring is sufficient for a person to excel in their role, but retraining refreshes their memory, brings in new concepts and ultimately makes them a better representative of their employer.

Steve Brechter is senior advisor, operations at Gray Stone Advisors and was previously chief operating officer at a fractional business jet provider. He notes a common

"A rigid compliance with a script for service comes across as disingenuous or insincere"

Steve Brechter, senior advisor, operations, Gray Stone Advisors



Harrods Aviation launches customer experience department

Harrods Aviation has launched a new department to further enhance excellence in its customer service provision.

The customer experience department is being headed up by Nathan Farrow, who has been a key part of the Harrods Aviation sales team for over 12 years. He says, "We wanted to structure the business' approach to customer service by taking a holistic view, bringing all of the touch points together and focussing on customer experience as a whole.

"We recognize that customer experience is so much more than just good service, it effects every part of our business, from the redesign of our lounges to resolving service issues.

"We have a fantastic group of empathetic, committed and client-focussed colleagues at Harrods Aviation. They understand what our customer's value and we want our colleagues to take ownership of their roles and feel empowered to make customer service decisions that feel right.

"Recently, I heard of a flight where a flight attendant was short on a specific type of ice cream. Without hesitation, they went to a local supermarket and bought the product. This is the kind of decision that we value.

"Within our industry, it is so often thought that we need to make outlandish gestures to please customers. My belief is that it all comes down to the feeling of relief that the customer has when they know a service will be provided correctly, efficiently and discreetly."



“We believe that a flight attendant should be equipped with the necessary training to deal with any situation”

Yasmin Milner, director, Corporate Flight Training

mistake made in the customer service realm is to not give customer-facing people the ability to influence outcomes.

“Rigid compliance with an inflexible script for service comes across as disingenuous or insincere to the customer,” he says. “But when someone feels they have true ownership of their processes and can influence outcomes, amazing things happen.

“At the fractional share aircraft provider, the flight attendants on one of our aircraft fleets did not like the kitchen utensils they were provided with for meal preparation. Every option provided – some at great cost – had shortcomings. But we got smart, gave them ownership of the process, and let them make the selection.

“Their attitudes changed overnight. They put together a hybrid set of utensils suitable for use on the aircraft that did a better job, which made them happier and enabled them to create more appealing food presentation for the customer – and it was done at a fraction of the cost. A true win-win.”

This approach of thinking about all staff as much as the customer is key – ultimately, without content staff, it’s difficult to create an authentic and positive customer experience.

“Although the business aviation sector does a phenomenal job providing great customer service to those that fly, it sometimes forgets that the crew onboard these flights warrant the same level of service,” says Mendez.

“I’ve seen it all too often, once passengers depart, FBO staff walk away without checking on the needs of the crew. Here, we train our team to provide the same level of service to all that visit Desert Jet Center.”

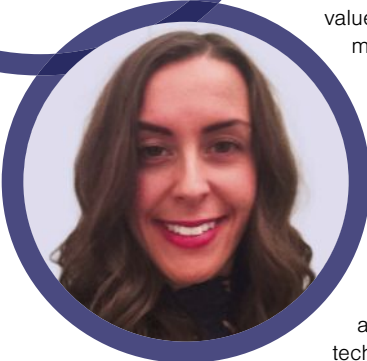
Measuring success

A successful customer service experience is subjective, but there are common boxes to tick. The expectation is to go above and beyond these for the business aviation sector. It is important to gain feedback from customers to check you are fulfilling their expectations and, if you are not, take the opportunity to shift the service you’re offering.

Mihai recommends looking at and using six elements when reviewing your customer service offering: customer surveys and feedback, Net Promoter Score (NPS), monitoring social media and online reviews, tracking repeat business, secret shopper programs and employee feedback.

“By combining multiple methods and tools, companies can gain a comprehensive understanding of their customer service performance, identify areas for improvement and make data-driven decisions to enhance customer satisfaction,” notes Mihai.

This is a sentiment shared by Mendez, who believes you need to get feedback from your team. “If your team is happy, they are engaged and will provide a higher customer service level,” he says. “Regularly check in with your customers, request feedback on their satisfaction level, and ask whether you can improve on anything. Asking customers to participate in third-party surveys is another great way to get unbiased feedback and measure customer satisfaction.”



Brechter notes the importance of fully understanding what it is that your customers value – in other words, what is the value proposition? What do they hold as important?

“There are no templates, no magic formulas and no shortcuts to great customer service,” he says. “Only when you know what they value can you measure the degree to which it is being provided. But once you are clear on the value proposition, it’s worth remembering, ‘what gets measured gets improved.’”

Making improvements

To those in business aviation looking to improve their customer service offering, the message is clear – get to know your customers, go above and beyond to get feedback, invest in retraining your staff regularly and empower those employees, too.

Mihai also recommends prioritizing safety and service, personalizing experiences, embracing technology and encouraging a customer-centric culture.

“Exceptional customer service is an ongoing commitment that requires dedication, continuous improvement, and a deep understanding of your clients’ desires and expectations,” she notes.

“Focus on what really matters to their customers – manage their expectations correctly, create memorable experiences for them and focus on time savings,” concludes Klaus. ○

Creating the personal touch

Business Jet Center (BJC) is the highest-rated FBO among the four service providers at Dallas Love Field, Texas and has been in operation since 1997.

BJC’s chief experience officer, Cat Wren is one of the most experienced and well-respected experts in customer service in the industry and here gives some pointers on providing excellent customer service:

“Anyone can do a job or fill a role, but it takes a special person with a servant’s heart to prioritize the customer’s overall experience on each and every encounter.

“Personalization is everything between the customer and FBO. What sets you and your company apart from your competition? And as a leader, what are you doing to enable your employees to take ownership of that personalized experience?”

“When it comes to teaching your own team what good customer service is, it’s vital to ask if your team members take the time to stop and listen to the customer, to truly slow down during the business of the day-to-day, not just when problems arise. Do they genuinely care how a customer’s day is going or how their weekend was?”

“Take the time to map out a few guidelines with your team and then let your people run with it. Encourage them to think outside the box and understand that one size doesn’t fit all when it comes to each different customer’s experience.

Experiences don’t have to be costly or expensive to make an impact, they just need to make a person feel special.”

