

## THE \$7,000 SNAFU

### *Confronting the "not my problem" response to customer service*

By H. James Harrington

What does quality cost? In the airline industry, it costs a lot. I just returned from a trip to the World Quality Congress held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The lowest cost of a roundtrip ticket by class was:

- Economy: \$1,024
- Business: \$8,100 (7.9 X more expensive than economy)
- First class: \$12,000 (11.7x more expensive than economy)

Well, I'm a big man, so I decided to pay the extra 700 percent (*i.e.*, \$7,076) to fly business class. For that much money I was expecting very high-quality service because most other aspects of airline travel are the same. For example:

- You go to and from the same place.
- It takes the same amount of time to get there.
- Your luggage is unloaded at the same time as other classes.
- The same soft drinks are served in all classes.
- Plastic dinnerware is used throughout.

Granted, the food on British Airways is a little better in business class, but the biggest difference is that the seats recline so that you get a good night's rest. That was important to me because I was traveling for 46 hours, arriving at nine in the morning and scheduled to begin work at noon.

As luck would have it, my seat wouldn't recline at all, although the flight attendants worked on it diligently. One pushed buttons while another pushed on the seat's back, and still another attendant pulled on the seat itself—all to no avail. After more than 30 minutes of trying, the purser told me that the seat couldn't be fixed and that no others were available in either business or first class.

To make me feel better, he told me to pick out something from the airline's "Shopping the World" folder, and he would give it to me to make up for the inconvenience. After looking through the folder, I selected a Sony CLIE handheld PDA. I figured if I couldn't sleep, at least I'd have a new toy to learn how to operate and help pass the time. I turned in my choice to a flight attendant, and about 45 minutes later, another flight attendant returned to inform me that I couldn't have the PDA because it cost about \$600. I had to limit my selection to no more than \$75. There was very little in the folder for less than \$75—some perfume, toys and candy but not much more. Even a woman's scarf cost more than \$80.

I'd paid more than a \$7,000 premium for the convenience of a reclining seat, but when the airline failed to provide that service, it was unwilling to give me a \$600 gift to make up for the problem. Thus, the gift that was intended to make me happy became a negative factor.

I was then asked to provide information about my return flight: day, time and flight number. I thought the company was planning on doing something to make up for this inconvenience on my return flight. Perhaps I'd be upgraded to first class, or at least some special services would be provided. Though my expectations were high, in the end I was disappointed again. I received no special consideration.

When I picked up my luggage in Dubai, my suitcase was open and my clothes and PC were jumbled in a large plastic sack. I took the sack to the complaint office and was told that my luggage must have been unlatched when I checked it. We stuffed the clothes back into the suitcase, and I snapped it shut. I put my PC in my briefcase. When I got to my hotel room, I received a call from the bell captain informing me that my bag had come apart and my clothes had fallen out. When I closely examined the suitcase, I could see that it had been hit on the side, breaking the latches.

Before returning home, I taped the suitcase together and explained the problem to the counter attendant in Dubai. She told me to talk to the complaint department in San Francisco. In San Francisco, I was told to take the bag back to where I'd bought it and ask the store to replace it. If that business was unwilling to replace the suitcase, I should bring it back to San Francisco airport, and they'd see if they could have it fixed. *(Note: It's 120 miles roundtrip to the San Francisco airport from my house.)*

When I took the suitcase to the store I'd bought it from, the shop clerk looked at it and said it had been mishandled and therefore the store wasn't responsible for repairing it.

You can see that British Airways met my requirements: It got me and my luggage to Dubai and back, but it fell far short of meeting my expectations. The airline industry, and many other service organizations, could learn from this example. When a customer is dissatisfied, don't promise something you can't deliver, don't set expectations in his or her mind that you can't fulfill and don't push a dissatisfied customer's problems off onto someone else. Once a customer's problem is defined, you must stay with it until it has been solved.

### **About the author**

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