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MORE NOTES ON SERVICE QUALITY

By: John McConnell

At last. After about twenty hours of travel I was approaching the reception desk of the Sheraton Hotel at Harbour Island, San Diego. A shower, food and a bed were eagerly anticipated. The receptionist looked up my name in her computer. Nothing. I gave her the booking number sent to me by my client. More nothing. It did not seem to matter much. They had a room and booked me in. The next morning I paid the account and left for Tijuana.

A day or two later my client's PA asked me if she could have a copy of my hotel account. When she booked my room at the Sheraton, she had used my client's credit card to guarantee the reservation, and the card had been charged a cancellation fee. Apparently I was a no-show. The hotel was refusing to believe that not only did I show up, but also that I had paid the bill and that a cancellation fee was not appropriate. The PA needed evidence of my stay before the Sheraton would consider refunding the cancellation fee. This left me wondering how it could be that there was no trace either of my name or my booking number at reception. Clearly the booking existed, otherwise a cancellation fee would not have been charged.

The PA re-confirmed my booking for the return journey, and gave me a booking number.

Ten days later a taxi dropped me off at the Sheraton again. Again, there was no trace of my name or my booking number in the receptionist's computer. However, this time they were booked out. After a couple of phone calls, Bobby, the receptionist, reported

that she had found me a room at the nearby Hilton Hotel. Good enough. She escorted me to the front of the hotel, put me in a cab and told the driver where I was going. Three minutes later I was at reception at the Hilton.

I did not exist in the Hilton's computer either. However, this receptionist was a terrier. She made a series of phone calls, eventually tracking down Bobby at the Sheraton. After a while, she figured out that Bobby had contacted the Hilton's central reservation service, and that I had been booked into the Hilton Resort at Mission Bay rather than the Hilton Hotel at Harbour Island. Again, the receptionist arranged a taxi. She told the driver to take me to the Hilton Resort at Mission Bay.

About an hour and a half after I had originally arrived at the Sheraton, my taxi drove past a sign that informed the passing traffic that Mission Bay had been reached and it then pulled up under a huge Hilton sign. I paid him, grabbed my luggage and wandered in to reception. "No sir, you have no booking here!" Truly, I didn't need to hear that. I showed him the page on which was written my booking details. As matters transpire, Mission Bay has two Hiltons. The Hilton Resort at Mission Bay, and The Hilton Hotel at Mission Bay. The taxi driver had brought me to the Hotel rather than to the Resort.

Another taxi and another fare later I arrived at the Resort, my fourth stop at a hotel that evening. The receptionist was excellent. She had the type of

genuine welcoming smile that illuminated the entire lobby. She checked me in and found the night manager to have the safe opened so she could exchange some currency for me. Everything she did was executed cheerfully and with military precision. I could not help but think that any hotel chain that had fifty such employees would conquer the hotel world. The bellboy was another matter. All the way to my room, on the other side of the resort, he did his best Crocodile Dundee impersonation. Paul Hogan has much to answer for!

My flight to Indianapolis was early the next morning. I would need to leave the resort early, before breakfast was served. Bother spit and darn! Nonetheless, I had a room, I had coffee and I had mail to attend to.

The following day found me at the airport one hour and fifty minutes before take-off. The queue for the American Airlines counter was very long. After a few minutes an airline employee wandered to a point near the end of the queue and informed the waiting travellers that from where he was standing, the queue was 45 minutes long, and that we would be better served to go back downstairs and check in with the Sky Caps. This, he assured us, would take only ten minutes or so.

He lied. It took twenty-five minutes for the Sky Cap to reach me, check his computer and to discover that, as is normal, I had been "randomly" selected by the computer to have my baggage searched. How a computer can randomly select me on over half of my US flights is beyond me, but there was nothing that could be done, apart from write yet another letter to the appropriate authority to ask what dangerous profile I apparently matched.

I was escorted back upstairs and placed in the security queue. This was going to be quick. There were six people in front of me, and two security officers were independently conducting searches of baggage.

Wrong...again. By the time I had reached the head of the queue, my plane had departed. The security officers were so slow that they were suffering a constant tirade of abuse from impatient travellers standing in the security queue. They had arrived the requisite two hours early, but nevertheless were going to miss their planes. The abuse, naturally enough, had the effect of encouraging the security officers to work at an even slower pace in order that they might torment their abusers.

By now I was thinking evil thoughts about American Airlines who had left half the check-in agents positions unmanned on a Saturday morning (saving on wages, I suppose) and caused long delays in processing passengers. Neither was I pleased with the performance of the security officers. Once my bags had been cleared, the agent gave me a boarding pass on

a new flight, told me that it was boarding already, and that I should HURRY.

I asked her if she, an American Airlines staff member, was seriously suggesting that I should hurry. The acid comment was lost on her. I hit the security checkpoint queue. It was forty yards long. I know this because I paced it out. A security guard waylaid me and asked when my flight was boarding. I told him, and he ushered me to the head of the queue. Those still in the queue over whom I was promoted glowered at me like a lynch mob. Good humour was in short supply at San Diego airport that morning.

A few minutes later I was at the boarding gate. I was the last passenger and the staff were waiting for me. Once again I was informed that I had been randomly selected to be searched. It was too much. I burst into laughter. The security agent told me if I did not hurry up, I would miss the plane.

I told her I no longer cared, and that I had grown weary of incompetence and poor customer service. Her response was to threaten me with being refused entry to the flight. I was reminded of what we used to call the Tram Conductor Formula. Average Person + Uniform + Authority Over Other Humans = Instant Power-mad Lunatic.

It must have been obvious to her that I was not a happy chappie, but I held my temper and asked her not to threaten me, as I adopted the position.

The second security agent was quick. My assailant was removed and he put himself on the job. This chap was very thorough. He completely emptied my briefcase. He removed the battery from my laptop. He emptied the pencil case I carry. He scrutinised my packet of vitamins and enquired after the nature of a plastic bottle containing a prescription drug. He carefully removed every pen, roll of tape, floppy, business card and went so far as to remove spectacles from their case. He carefully searched my wallet. I resisted the temptation to carefully count my money when he had finished. When he had completed his search, he gave me his best sarcastic smile and said he hoped I had a good flight. That's what I get for being a smart-arse, I suppose. This bloke made the Melbourne tram conductors of old look like choirboys. Welcome to San Diego Airport.

The gate agent was no fool. She took one look at me and knew what was going through my mind as I stood at the entry to the jetway, wondering whether I would actually board the plane. My guess is that my experience was not as uncommon as one might hope. As she held out her hand for my boarding pass, she asked me to consider the other passengers, many of whom also had experienced a most trying morning.

Of course she was correct and I abandoned the half formed plan to march back to the check-in counter and

book on a later flight, on another airline, whilst the plane stood at the gate until my luggage was found and removed. If carried through, such a course of action would punish the passengers to a greater extent than it would the airline. I went to Indianapolis.

Two weeks later I left Indianapolis. I stood in an American Airlines queue for about thirty minutes to reach check-in. Again, many check-in positions were vacant. Again, my baggage was searched. So was I, but I did make the flight. The security check of my baggage took only twenty minutes or so. I was searched again on the next leg. Is it possible to buy plastic belt buckles?

In Los Angeles, I reported to the Qantas check-in counter. Almost every check-in position was filled. In ten minutes I was clutching both a boarding pass and a beer. The singular difference between the airlines was the staffing levels at the check in counters.

Why do we keep hearing that quality in service is difficult to measure or to manage; or that service industries are somehow exempt when it comes to Deming's approach?