How was your latest trip?

Stuck between enjoying a fun vacation and rescheduling a flight - what is a customer to do when their airline makes them do all the work? Messaging and proactive service go a long way.

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Traveling usually is fun. You get to experience new things and forget about everyday worries for just a little bit. But what if the travel itself becomes the worry? Things happen – delays, technical issues, nature – all leading to interruption in your travel plans and there’s not much you can do about it.

Working for a company that constantly thinks about how to make customer engagement more effortless opened my eyes to today’s status of many engagement programs. It always gets my brain going when I’m in a situation in which I had hoped for an easier way to solve my problem. To give you a few examples...
Work hard, travel even harder

I travel a lot for work. Not enough to get any status at an airline, but enough to consider myself a calm traveler. I don’t get all stressed during the security line anymore. What does cause stress, though, are delays. Not the 30-minute ones, but the ones that keep getting later and later till it’s been 3, 4, or more hours. Especially when it’s happening on a flight back home late in the day.

During one of those flights, I got stuck at an airport for hours. I sat there, waiting for any information, and, besides the usual “Your flight is delayed. The new departure time is...” messages, I didn’t receive any information (and there was no customer service rep at the gate either). So, I called the airline to check if I would get out at all or if I should find a hotel room for the night.

While I was waiting on hold, I walked a few rounds, with my backpack and carry-on. The airport was full, so I had a hard time hearing anything due to the noise around me (am I still listening to the hold message or is this already the agent?). It was not an easy conversation (A lot of “sorry, can you repeat that”. I felt sorry for the agent.). He told me that the crew for my flight was stuck on another plane, but it was set to arrive shortly after 9pm, so we were able to leave the same day (and arrive at 2am local time).

What is an air force base good for?

A few years ago, when I was still living in Germany, I flew to the US to visit my now husband and his parents over Christmas. We had the first snow in Germany, and it was beautiful. Too bad that planes don’t like snow as much, so we took off with a delay of about an hour (defrosting took a while). After a few hours in the air the captain told us that we were flying against the wind which meant we would arrive even later than expected. I had a nearly five-hour overlay, so it should have been fine.

It wasn’t. Shortly before we arrived at the airport, the captain let us know that the airport was closed due to a snowstorm and to top it off, he couldn’t stay in the air much longer because he was running out of fuel. We landed in the middle of nowhere on an air force base (Poughkeepsie, in case you were wondering). There was no way I could have made my connection now, but I also had no way of connecting with my husband or the airline. The only things I had were my German cellphone (and calls in the US are incredibly expensive) and an amazing seat neighbor who lent me her phone for a quick call to let my husband know that I’m running late.

Everything else, I had to figure out later at the airport. As you can imagine everybody on that plane had to rebook their flights, so the line was long, and I ended up running across the airport to make my new connecting flight.
When communication is inconsistent

Not too long ago, I met with a few of my friends for a long weekend. We were all very excited, since we hadn’t seen each other in months (we live all over the US and Canada). But once we arrived at our destination, we quickly realized that we didn’t pick the best weekend for a get-together. A storm was on the horizon. During the second day, one of my friends received a notification from her airline saying that she could switch her flight due to “weather”.

The problem was, all four of us were flying out the same day, but no one else received a similar notification (I knew I had signed up for notifications, since I was getting them for the gate changes on my incoming flight). What followed were two days of uncertainty, trying to keep up with the local news and getting information from our airlines. We couldn’t do anything about the weather anyway, so we would have loved to enjoy our time together. But instead we kept checking our phones and spent a lot of time on hold.

In a perfect world, but not necessarily...

Instead of being stuck on the phone or paying horrendous fees for international calls it would have been great to update my travel plans in different ways; for example:

- Respond to the notifications received via SMS without the need to change channels. SMS is perfectly fine to ask for the status of a delayed flight or to check for alternative flights, so why not use it?
- Check for the reason of a delayed flight and change the itinerary within the app using an in-app chat or messaging feature.
- Receive a call back if the chat agent can’t handle the request instead of me having to call in. Sure, not everything can be handled via chat, but it’s a great start to gather information and get the conversation going. If there is a case in which an agent needs to speak with the customer, the agent could initiate a call back.

Why am I such a fan of messaging? Because it allows me to send a message in any situation: using the airplane’s Wi-Fi, in noisy airports, or while my friends and I enjoy some “us-time”. I could have sent a message, do whatever, and I would have received an answer from an agent sooner rather than later. The agent and I could have texted back and forth, with pauses in between, but without ever losing the context of our conversation.

Is messaging the solution to everything? Probably not, but it helps make a lot of situations easier and effortless.

Tags: customer experience, customer service, intelligent engagement, IVR, live chat, messaging, mobile apps, omnichannel customer service, proactive engagement, travel industry, virtual assistants
More Information

Engage with the traveler – their way
Learn more about messaging and how it can help you create a more flexible customer engagement.

Learn more

About Josefine Fouarge

Josefine Fouarge is Sr. Product Marketing Manager in the Nuance Enterprise Division, focusing on automated and human assisted engagements in digital channels. Josefine brings more than 10 years of experience in sales and marketing for technology related businesses in Germany and the U.S. Her past expertise ranges from selling and configuring Apple computers to defining the market and messaging for a security software for on-premise datacenters and services offered through the cloud.

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