

THE ASH CLOUD STRESS TEST

« IT'S NOT ONLY EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES THAT CAST LIGHT ON THE TRUE BENEFITS OF A SERVICE CENTER, EVEN IN THE AGE OF ONLINE BOOKING »



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When Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupted in April 2010 European airspace shut down for several days. But, while planes were grounded, airlines' customer care representatives had plenty of work on their hands.

In such situations, the critical chain of customer care typically ends at airline call centers. And yet, call centers have often been the focus of cost-cutting efforts in recent years. But having suitably qualified staff during a crisis situation could make a substantial difference to airline branding and revenue. A return on investment is definitely available.

The AIC Service & Call Center has bases in Cologne and Hanover, and works for a number of airlines including TUIfly.com, Germanwings, Etihad Airways, Afriqiyah Airways and Afghan carrier Safi Airways.

Dealing with the ash cloud crisis took experience and highly skilled staff. AIC gained valuable insight a couple of months earlier. Germanwings, a subsidiary of Lufthansa, was affected by the Lufthansa pilot strike. AIC prompted the client to adapt the reservations tool on its website so that customers could rebook themselves free of charge. Moreover, it established a toll-free call number for Germanwings customers, increased the number of its personnel, and bundled resources. It allowed the company not only to reduce the number of complaints but also to keep the escalating calls to a minimum level. Greater flexibility allowed a speedier response than is possible with other in-house service centers.

Nevertheless, on some days during the ash

cloud crisis there were ten times the usual number of calls and emails from worried passengers. It was, however, necessary to be just as professional as on any ordinary business day. The entire staff was deployed, with work shifts extended.

Up to 35,000 calls were fielded on the heaviest call days. Yet of foremost importance for any call center—beside the volume of calls received—is the rate of calls accepted. For the period 15-20 April 2010, this was 40% on average. Even though rates of 95% are otherwise the rule, this performance metric represents an amazing accomplishment given the severity of the situation. Calls increased by an order of magnitude and yet the acceptance rate was only halved.

LESSONS LEARNED

The experience included some valuable lessons for airlines looking to improve customer service, especially when normal airport operations are disrupted. AIC has a very strong internal training program and insists on a high skill set for its employees. The program indicates specific tasks for which each employee is well suited—such as the languages they speak and the reservations systems they command. It also assesses any other skills they possess, such as complaint management or handling tax refunds and fee reimbursements.

Language skills are of crucial importance to AIC. The company's program includes support in 16 languages—Danish, Farsi and Bulgarian among them. Each employee speaks at least two other languages—one of them their native tongue—beside German and English.

All staff members are given comprehensive



Each AIC employee speaks at least three languages and is trained in communications



communications training by an in-house trainer. In addition, AIC employees undergo regularly scheduled monitoring, testing by mystery shoppers and predefined language controls on selected subject areas. If employees are commensurately trained and prepared, they perform at the highest professional level.

It's not only extraordinary circumstances that cast light on the benefits of a service center, even in the age of online booking. Passengers can rebook on the go, report excess or special luggage, and request seat reservations quickly and easily by contacting a service center's employees by email or telephone.

Even in "mini crisis" situations, picking up the telephone makes a fast solution to the problem possible. For example, if a passenger is not yet recorded on the flight manifest and the flight is ready to board, a check-in employee can contact the airline's reservation line and eventually an agent of AIC. The "airport line" there is treated on a priority basis by specially trained employees.

A quality call center provider can make a vital contribution to an airline's customer care process. It can do this efficiently and cost effectively while adding to brand value. ■

European airspace shut down in the wake of the volcanic ash cloud, putting extra pressure on airline call centers