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ascend

Taking your airline to new heights

A man in a dark pinstriped suit and tie is smiling and holding a small white model airplane in his hands. He is standing in front of a window with horizontal blinds. The background is slightly out of focus, showing the blinds and some light coming through.

World's Happiest Airline

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No Blind Spots

For a decade-and-a-half, airline executives from around the world have provided valuable feedback each year in a variety of areas that help evolve the products and services provided by their information technology partner, *Sabre Airline Solutions*[®].

■ By Steve Clampett | *Ascend* Contributor

Photos: Jupiter

A little more than 15 years ago, *Sabre Airline Solutions* sent its first customer satisfaction survey to the 300 or so executives of the airline community. At the time, no one knew quite what the response would be or the changes that would evolve as a result of the customer feedback received.

The customer satisfaction survey is a formal, consistent instrument for understanding trends, judging product perceptions, finding or reinforcing areas needing improvement, validating areas doing well and determining where to concentrate efforts. Bottom line: it's a way of ensuring there are no blind spots.

Comprising 16 questions, the survey asks customers their opinions about six key areas:

1. What is your perception of our solutions?
2. What is your perception of *Sabre Airline Solutions* versus its competition?
3. What do you think of our customer care?
4. What do you think of our account management teams?
5. What do you think of the different pieces of our service offerings?
6. And, of course, the big one: Would you do business with *Sabre Airline Solutions* again?

Generally, much of the survey feedback received has already been gathered from other sources, including account management teams, user groups and airline executive visits. However, the customer satisfaction survey is conducted by an independent international marketing research firm that collects and analyzes the feedback in an objective, unbiased manner. The survey results are then provided to *Sabre Airline Solutions* for dissemination to the appropriate departments, which, in turn, respond with the necessary actions.

And The Survey Says ...

The employees of *Sabre Airline Solutions* continue to be its greatest asset. This was indicated in the first customer satisfaction survey, and little has changed over the years. Although



Airline executives who took the *Sabre Airline Solutions* survey indicated that help desk staff needed more technical expertise. As a result, first-line support personnel now receive additional training and the first-call resolution rate has improved considerably.

competitors may attempt to duplicate *Sabre Airline Solutions* software lines and product code, the breadth and depth of the sales and account management teams' subject matter expertise is impossible to duplicate. Our roots run deep in the airline industry, and this is our biggest differentiator in the marketplace.

Sabre Airline Solutions is also a truly global company. Five years ago, the company was locally based in Texas. Today, its global footprint is far reaching and includes offices in Krakow, Poland; Bangalore, India; Manila, Philippines; Montevideo, Uruguay; as well as others

throughout the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The goal is to be as close as possible to our clients worldwide.

The survey has also been helpful in pointing out weaknesses and areas needing improvement within *Sabre Airline Solutions*. In fact, the company has undertaken some significant changes during the past five years. While not all of them have been a direct result of survey findings, many are, at least in part, a response to the feedback received.

While *Sabre Airline Solutions* has made notable progress in the consistency of its solutions, product delivery and customer care, survey results indicate more work is still needed. Because most customers purchase a "basket" of solutions from the company, they expect, as well they should, the entire package to look and perform in a similar manner. We're pushing hard to establish a unified product development methodology, a single delivery methodology and an account management policy that is consistent across all product lines. The objective is to provide each airline with high-level and high-value service every time.

In addition, *Sabre Airline Solutions* created the role of customer delivery executive within its Customer Service and Delivery organization to adequately meet the needs of its larger airline customers. These CDEs are specifically focused on and responsible for the delivery of all products to each of these larger, strategic customers, and they have been well received by the airlines.



Airlines around the world have access to *Sabre Airline Solutions* experts who are located in a variety of offices throughout the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, including Krakow, Bangalore, Manila and Montevideo.

Survey feedback also reveals products from *Sabre Airline Solutions* have a high degree of brand recognition within the airline industry. If an airline needs a solution, *Sabre Airline Solutions* is a player in virtually every category, with one or two other competitors on the list as well. We constantly strive to be true to our brand and understand our customers' expectations. When a solution is developed and delivered, first and foremost, it must work properly in the customer's business environment. An airline purchasing a product from a "boutique" competitor may be more forgiving if the solution fails to deliver as promised than if the product was purchased from *Sabre Airline Solutions*.

To help meet customer expectations, Customer Service and Delivery is now partnering with clients through an interactive pilot program. It's a way to engage customers earlier in the process by allowing them to use solutions on a trial basis to refine their requirements and better understand product features and benefits. The pilot program has been particularly successful with *Sabre Airline Solutions* crew products and will be applied consistently across all product suites.

Also in the area of customer support, survey respondents noted that the help desk staff

needed more technical expertise to sufficiently answer product queries and troubleshoot issues. In response, the first-line support people have received a great deal of additional training, and the percentage of first-call resolutions has increased significantly.

Product documentation has also been identified as an issue in the survey. Respondents have asked *Sabre Airline Solutions* to provide additional user, technical, business simulation and training documentation. While it would be virtually impossible to maintain large books of printed product information, much of this is now available on the *Sabre® Community Portal*. The portal's online knowledge center includes user manuals, product plans and release notes as well as the latest software downloads. Quick reference instruction guides and product demonstrations are also available.

At the other end of the spectrum, *Sabre Airline Solutions* spent a great deal of time last year fine-tuning its product portfolio and corresponding marketing messages. Feedback from a number of channels, including the satisfaction survey, indicated customers appreciated the wide range of products and services offered, but had difficulty completely understanding the company's solutions portfolio. In response, the

product portfolio has been repositioned into three key suites — *Sabre® AirVision™ Marketing & Planning*, *SabreSonic® Customer Sales & Service* and *Sabre® AirCentre™ Enterprise Operations*. As well, marketing messages were simplified and clarified, transitioning from an emphasis on the technical aspects of products and services to focusing on the *Sabre Airline Solutions AdvantageSM* — flexibility, accessibility, choice and experience — our customers receive.

To help carriers survive and even thrive in today's airline industry, *Sabre Airline Solutions* relies heavily on the input of its customers. They shape future solution direction by expressing their needs and actively participating in the product planning, delivery and support processes. **F**

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+count it up

1.9+ billion

The amount in U.S. dollars the airline industry collected in ancillary fees during the fourth quarter of 2009, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. This represents an 18.3 percent increase from the same quarter the previous year.

79

The amount in U.S. dollars per barrel of oil IATA forecasts this year, an increase of US\$17 over last year. This means fuel will rise from 24 percent of operating costs to 26 percent.

6.5

The percentage of total revenues, of the 32 carriers that reported to BTS, generated by ancillary fees. In 2009, the carriers collected US\$7.8 billion in ancillary fee revenue, compared to US\$5.5 billion the previous year.

1,400

The number of aircraft expected to be delivered this year, which, according to IATA, puts the industry at risk for over capacity.

736 million

The amount in U.S. dollars collected in baggage fees during October through December last year, according to BTS. US\$564 million was collected for reservations change fees and US\$611 million from other ancillary fees, such as pet transportation fees and frequent flyer award program mileage sales.

32 million

The amount of jobs the aviation industry supports, according to IATA, equating to US\$3.5 trillion in economic activity.