Putting the customer last

Richard Asher   April 20, 2015, 11:23 am

DIY check in isn't for author Richard Asher.

"Richard Asher's somewhat grumpy, somewhat cynical column view of modern travel and life

Just for your future reference," says the airport lady with the blood-red lipstick, "you put your passport in the scanner face down, like this."

I nod and grunt. And make a mental note to deliberately not remember*anything* for "future reference".

"Are you OK from here, or would you still like my help?" she asks hopefully.

But she's not getting away that easy. Because I smile goofily and ask her to stay and help.

The screen asks me if I've packed my own luggage.

"Have you packed your own luggage?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply, my grin broadening.

She touches the large green icon labelled "Yes".

The screen asks me if I'm carrying any liquids.

"Are you carrying any liquids?" she asks.

"No," I answer, positively beaming, while she has to wear her deeply concerned customer-service expression.

She hits the big red button marked "No".

And so on.

Welcome to my annoying, passive-resistance response to the self-service movement, already monumentally annoying in Europe and, I fear, gaining momentum in Australia. I'm going to keep doing this every time a company tries to make me learn systems or do work their employees used to do for me. Play dumb, and get the helper-person to do it.

This, in a roundabout sort of way, is how you get the service you always did. Correctly executed, it's just like the good old days.

Basically, what's happening at airports is this: instead of approaching a desk and being asked questions by a staff member, who then presses computer buttons, you and a cluster of other would-be passengers with furrowed brows approach what looks like a space-age Stonehenge, pick a console, and press the buttons yourself.

Thanks to everyone's gormless co-operation on this, which I find stupefying, the airline sacks half its staff while you do their labour*and* give them money.

We're being laughed at, I tell you.

From airports to hotels to buses, companies are getting us to DIY everything from check-ins to check-outs. Increasingly, we don't get a say in the matter. London buses no longer take cash, so if you're a tourist, then sorry, you'll have to take time out of your holiday and get an Oyster card. It makes it easier for the Transport for London people, you see. And that, of course, is all that seems to matter to the firms steering us down the self-service course. They market these things as a slick improvement in efficiency. Uh, that may be true. But for whom, exactly?

Call me a grumpy, change-resistant old goat, but I think the answer is rarely you and me. Maybe if I'd grown up, as kids will now, in a world where you self-serve everything, I'd consider all this quite normal. But having reached my thirties in a cosy, comforting existence during which I didn't have to undergo systems training in order to do my shopping, I'll always consider that privilege the preserve of people who actually get*paid* to make friends with whatever boring computer is in question.

It's not that I*can't* learn a system or press buttons. I do these things at work, I do them on my laptop, I do them on my TV. But I do them for money or pleasure, entirely from choice. When I am a paying customer, on the other hand, I object in principle to being trained like a performing seal. I object to expending even a scrap of energy on a process that exists purely to make life easier for someone I am*already paying* , not to mention putting a load of people out of work.

Sure, it takes me under five minutes to really grasp an "interface". It may only be five minutes, but when I'm on my deathbed, I'll be kinda bitter about those 300 seconds I gave to oil the wheels of a corporate machine that had accountants and fat-cat executives and money and employees and didn't need to use a pipsqueak like me for what amounts to a basic IT

internship. Is that weird?

I have this crazy notion that airport lady will always be able to use her machine hassle-free, because she does it all day. She's a specialist, dedicated to the art of negotiating her chosen employer's system, where I've got to deal with different challenges, cantankerous in their own special ways, at dozens of different airports. So I'll always need a few seconds of flailing upside-down passports at scanners. Maybe I am disproportionately bad-tempered, but that seriously bugs me. Yes, it's only a few seconds of my life each time, but you and me are still doing what, to me, is staff work. Which makes us jolly great mugs, doesn't it?

The only way I'm going to get a slice of reward for doing slave check-in work at airports is to buy airline shares in the hopes of getting some of the increased profit they make after sacking the staff and replacing them with me. That would be fair, but a risky way to get a pay check. I suppose I could just trust the companies to pass on the savings to me, the consumer, with reduced prices, which would also be fair. Fair but unlikely, and impossible to quantify in a way that will increase goodwill in the moment.

Maybe I'm guilty of missing the bigger picture. Maybe these things *do* reduce queuing time and thus make our lives better. Even so, what if I quite *like* switching off and letting someone else do the work? It's not all about time, you know. Especially if the saving comes with a side dish of annoyance.

A different framework would change everything. With a little thought, bad blood can become good blood. Give me an on-the-spot incentive, for example, and I'm fully on board. I've never seen any advantage in using online check-in, since I'm always confronted with the same long queue at the airport, and the seat selector thing rarely works. So if the airline wants me to take the time out to do this, which seems to make them very happy, they should at least offer me a free coffee voucher.

Instead, though, companies go for the opposite of what I'd consider clever consumer psychology. Irish airline Ryanair, for example, sell you a cheap ticket and then punish you with a £70 charge if you rock up at the airport desk with the temerity not to have checked in online.

If companies like Ryanair are really so excited about us going DIY, why don't they rather say: "Here's the price, but we'll give you a £70 discount for checking in online." It's the same thing, really, but wouldn't it create goodwill — instead of hatred and bitterness — from people like me? Your company would go from bad guy to good guy in a heartbeat. Customers like to patronise a good guy. Lifetime value and all that. Just a thought.

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