The All-Important First and Last Impression: A guide to auditing the trip to and from your airport

Robert R. Nelson, Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper details a protocol to systematically analyze what guests experience as they enter and leave a destination via our airports. The paper pulls from the author’s experience researching for, and participating in, such an audit of the Philadelphia International Airport on behalf of the State of Delaware.

Introduction

Your visitors’ experience at the airport, and all along the drive to and from it, is analogous to the reception area of a business. It is the first and last impressions of your destination. Unfortunately, the quality of this experience is often neglected. Anyone selling a destination for meetings and conventions could benefit by auditing what visitors encounter as they arrive to and depart from their destination and by working with various stakeholders to improve this experience. This paper provides practical guidelines to conduct such audits.
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Outline

How to Get Started
Who Should Conduct the Audit?
Walking the Walk
• Airport terminal considerations
• Baggage claim
• Transportation issues
  ✓ Rental cars
  ✓ Taxi cabs
  ✓ Shuttles
• Highway issues
  ✓ Signage
  ✓ Appearance
• Overcoming challenges to change

Who Should Conduct the Audit?
One school of thought is that the audit should be the work of an independent individual who is trained to conduct such an analysis. Another approach is to involve representatives from a variety of stakeholders whose cooperation will be necessary to improve the situation work together on the audit.

Getting Started
One of the first issues is who should take the lead? This is an important question given the different jurisdictions involved. CVBs and DMOs are logical entities to initiate such efforts. As Davidson and Rogers (2006, p. 31) note, DMO’s need to go beyond marketing and take a role in managing their destination.

An airport audit requires that you “walk-the-walk” of your guests. As you do so keep in mind that some of them won’t be actually walking the walk. In other words, how welcoming is the experience of getting from your airport to the final destination for handicapped and mobility impaired individuals? Other concerns include is the airport itself clean and welcoming? Is signage clear? Is the signage multi-lingual? Is lighting appropriate in both day light and night conditions?

**The Terminal**
- Is the terminal clean and welcoming?
- Is directional signage clear and multilingual?
- Is the experience handicap friendly?
- Are the bathrooms well maintained and handicap friendly?
- Is there adequate seating?
- Is lighting appropriate?
- How are the noise levels?
- What tourist information is available?
- What transportation information is available?

Critique the food service and retail offerings.
- **Quality**
- **Variety**
- **Price**
- **Hours of operation**
- Is currency exchange readily available and fairly priced?
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Walking the Walk, continued

Baggage Claim
Is the baggage area clean and attractive?
Is security visible?
Is the wait for luggage to arrive reasonable?
How does one report a lost bag?

Transportation
Rental cars
Taxi cabs
Trains, shuttles and other modes

Highway signage and attractiveness of the drive to and from the airport.

Concluding Thoughts

Initiating an airport audit is not easy. Getting commitment to make improvements based on the findings of the audit is even more difficult. Coalition building is almost as important as the audit itself.

Items to be Included in a Tourism Airport Audit

The Terminal
Is the terminal clean and welcoming?
Is directional signage clear and multilingual?
Is the experience handicap friendly?
Are the bathrooms well maintained and handicap friendly?
Is there adequate seating?
Is lighting appropriate?
How are the noise levels?
What tourist information is available?
Critique the food service and retail offerings.
- Quality
- Variety
- Price
- Hours of operation
Is currency exchange readily available (what times) and fairly priced?

Baggage Claim
Is the baggage area clean and attractive?
Is security visible?
Is the wait for luggage to arrive reasonable?
How does one report a lost bag?

Transportation
Is there clear signage directing people to the various transportation options?
Are all waiting areas...
- Well lit?
- Clean and attractive?
- Safe and secure?
- Protected from inclement weather?
Are queues reasonable?
How are the needs of handicapped travelers accommodated?

Rental cars
If shuttle vans are used are they clean, odor free, welcoming and efficient?
Critique the highway signage BOTH to and from the rental car lot.

Taxi Cabs
Are adequate cabs available at all times?
Are fares clearly posted?

Trains
How are currency and change issues addressed.
Are the trains clean, odor free, welcoming and efficient?

Other Considerations
How are smokers accommodated both in and around the terminal (i.e. entrances, cab lines)?

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