



CHICKENS COME Home

The art of customer service has many elements that are common through myriad businesses. The thread I'm thinking of involves the assumed connections passengers make between completely different parts of the airline experience. What this has to do with safety involves perception only, but it may explain some recent events.

Consider this: Driving up to a restaurant with dingy, smeared windows, you might make an unconscious assumption that the kitchen is dirty, too, possibly unhealthy.

Similarly, it was observed some years back at an airline management conference that if passengers in the cabin see worn upholstery and a dirty service tray, they are likely to extrapolate that information into an assumption that something — say, engine maintenance — is amiss elsewhere on the aircraft.

A similar mechanism may have been at work when a furor erupted in the United States over what appeared to be the mistakes of one or a few regulators. Despite the fact that airline aviation has been undeniably safe, the U.S. Congress became outraged and consumer interest groups expressed fear. In response, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reacted. For some as-yet unexplained

reason, thousands of flights were canceled to perform an airworthiness directive that seems to have been around for a while and, the mechanics said, had been changed several times.

My contention is that recent airline service behavior was a root cause of some of the outrage that morphed into fear, creating the conditions that caused the cancellations and huge financial losses. In short, this was a case, as we said in the Shenandoah Valley, of the chickens coming home to roost.

The U.S. airline industry has not been winning many friends for the past decade or so. Repeated staff and budget cuts have pared most airlines to the bone in a frantic effort to survive a brutal market. The result is a system so thin and fragile that any disruption becomes a major inconvenience. One flight canceled for weather, mechanical or crew time reasons sends hundreds of people searching for replacement seats that generally don't exist because there are no more backup aircraft and system load factors are at record levels and continue to climb, so there's no room on later flights. And a major weather disruption causes people to be trapped on airplanes as airlines lack the staff or resources to get them off. Passengers got steamed, and transferred their heat to the government.

In the final analysis, it doesn't matter which airlines have poor service; all got tarred by the same brush.

I propose that this increasing tide of consumer anger over shoddy treatment made the short jump to fear when the FAA lapses were uncovered, using the same logic that says the engines are in poor shape if the tray is dirty. And politicians, knowing the depth of resentment against airlines, hitched their wagons to this overwhelming negative feeling to gain pre-election publicity.

It's instructive that some of the same people in government who were pushing FAA to clamp down on the airlines quickly became equally outraged at the amount of passenger inconvenience the groundings produced, taking the groundings as more proof that the agency has not been doing its job.

So what this may mean is that in order to contain fear, airlines need to do more than just be safe; they might have to keep passengers moderately happy, too.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

J.A. Donoghue
Editor-in-Chief
AeroSafety World