

# Empathy matters



Janelle Barlow, March, 2023. ©All rights reserved.



I once received service that was so touching it turned me into a loyal customer—even though it was other parties that caused the complaint. Whoever displays empathy, regardless of responsibility for the complaint, gives a sense of connection that enables all troubles to float away.

Here's an example. Many years ago, I made an around-the-world business trip booked on United Airlines. I started in San Francisco, flying to Hong Kong, and from there on to Denmark, returning to the United States.

In Hong Kong, my handbag was picked, and my passport was taken. I contacted the Hong Kong police, who had a "Look lady" message. "Don't carry your passport with you." They said I should contact the U.S. Embassy the following week to get a new passport. That was not going to work with my schedule.

Shortly thereafter, my hotel phone rang. I heard an American woman's voice who said she and a friend had been walking in Causeway Bay. They just happened to glance into a trash bin and saw an American passport lying on top. The eagle on the passport was visible, and they realized that the document did not belong in the trash bin. They reached in, picked it up, and found the hotel card where I was staying and had fortuitously placed inside the passport. They called me directly. My credit cards and cash were gone, but that was manageable.

I made my flight to Denmark and considered myself lucky.

After a night of partying in Denmark to say goodbye to my international colleagues, I discovered someone had robbed my hotel room, and my passport was missing again. I didn't find this out until 4 a.m. when I was getting ready to go to Copenhagen's Kastrup airport, booked on a flight to Heathrow airport in London. I tore everything apart, looking for that passport, but it wasn't there. I concluded that it had been taken along with my credit cards and cash.

I called the U.S. State Department at 4 a.m. and reached someone in the security booth. I told the guard my story; he didn't know if he could help me, but he told me to get all my belongings and come to the embassy. The man talked with me, listened to my accent, looked at some papers I had with me, and concluded that I must be a U.S. citizen. He printed a letter asking London airport officials to please let this lady go to the United States where she could sort out her passport problems. I was so grateful that I have never said anything negative about the U.S. State Department again!

At Kastrup, the security (which was pretty minimal in those days prior to 9/11) commiserated with the tragedy of having been robbed twice. I was waved through. This wouldn't happen in today's world, but it did in amiable Denmark. However, if you have flown through or transited at Heathrow, you know that security has always been tight.

They were not happy to see a woman traveling on a State Department letter. But it's all I had. It took me two hours to talk my way through security. Finally, I boarded my United flight to San Francisco. I located my seat, sat down, and burst into tears.

A flight attendant came up to me and asked what was happening. I told her that I'd been robbed twice, once in Hong Kong and then in Denmark, that I didn't have a passport, credit cards, or cash, and was traveling on a letter. The entire weight of this experience was too much for me.

She looked at me and said, "Gosh, that's horrible" I said, "Well, at least I've had my passport stolen twice on one trip, so that's probably my quota for a lifetime. I probably won't get robbed again." We both laughed about that. She then said, "Let me see what I can do." I didn't know if she would get me champagne and peanuts. I had no idea, but a little later, she came back to my seat and said, "Gather up your belongings; we're upgrading you to first class."

Many of you probably know that airline policies do not allow flight attendants to upgrade passengers once they have boarded. This policy is because without it, passengers might come on board and start asking for upgrades to any empty first-class seats. She must have been persuasive!

United didn't cause any of the problems I faced while traveling, and I certainly didn't blame anyone associated with the airline. But someone working for United had an empathic mindset and decided to see if she could make the last leg of my trip more pleasant.

I have never forgotten this act of empathy. As a result, I only fly United, frequently paying more, flying on connecting flights, and writing sensational stories about U.A. personnel who have been helpful and displayed high levels of empathy.

Whenever someone representing your organization has a chance to show empathy to a customer, there is a chance to create a memory that doesn't go away. This is particularly true when the complaint the customer has experienced has nothing to do with you!

