TRANSED 2012 – SENSITIVITY TRAINING – THE KEY TO ENHANCING THE COMMERCIAL AIRCRAFT TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

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SUMMARY

The following paper describes the importance of sensitivity training in terms of enhancing the person with a disabilities' experience when traveling on commercial aircraft. The paper highlights elements of successful sensitivity training programs and some of the underlying principles that form the foundation of industry best practices.

Key Words: Accessibility; commercial air travel; sensitivity training.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of sensitivity training to enhance the experience of the elderly or persons with disabilities when travelling on commercial airlines.

MATERIALS AND/OR METHODS

Rather than discuss the matter in conceptual terms this paper is based on factual and demonstrable training practices that are making a difference to travellers with disabilities today. Note – at WestJet, we call our ‘passengers’ ‘guests’ so you will see both terms used throughout the paper.

Materials used in the development of this paper include WestJet’s Sensitivity Training Manual and related on-line documents as referenced throughout the paper.

Leading edge sensitivity training gives employees the best tools to respond to the needs of guests with disabilities by incorporating input from focus groups and employees and non-employees with special needs to help develop effective sensitivity training material.

Building a comprehensive sensitivity training program that covers our World Class Guest Experience philosophy to general awareness, terminology & etiquette, body mechanics and proper lifting techniques including sections on the variety of disabilities and their unique attributes.

RESULTS OR EXPECTED RESULTS

The expected result is to compel the reader to truly understand the importance of what an effective sensitivity training program can do to take good intentions and transform them into a consistently robust, pleasant, efficient, respectful and meaningful experience for persons with disabilities travelling via commercial airlines.

Through this exchange I hope to come up with even more innovative and inspiring conversations about sensitivity training to achieve continuous improvement.
DISCUSSION

Overview

In 2005, people 65 years of age and older made up 12% of the population, in 2031, 25% of the population will be 65 years and up. Of this population 78% have mobility impairment, 40% have hearing loss, and 21% have a visual impairment.

Sensitivity training helps prepare employees who work with the public to increase their general awareness about the special needs resulting from various types of disabilities, develop strategies that will help to communicate effectively and sensitivity with guests with disabilities, and gain a heightened understanding of how to better serve guests with disabilities and impairments.

Through this training we train our agents how we can best serve our guests with disabilities and impairments in a sensitive and respectful manner. It is our aim to provide them with the knowledge and skills that they require to successfully assist our guests.

At WestJet we pride ourselves on a world class guest experience that we provide for all of our Guests. We do recognize that our guests with impairments and disabilities often require additional assistance. This course is designed to provide our agents with the knowledge and information that they need to properly assist these guests.

Ensuring employees are well trained and educated and ensuring guests who are disabled are as aware of the policies and procedures as possible before flying generates a host of mutually beneficial outcomes including:

- Appropriate language;
- Appropriate accommodation of the guest’s unique needs based on a conversation with the guest;
- Clear definitions (for example):
  - Ambulatory - A Guest who is able to board and deplane or move about the aircraft cabin unassisted regardless of the degree of impairment.
  - Non-Ambulatory - A Guest who is not able to board and deplane or move about the cabin unassisted.
  - Self-Reliant - A Guest who is independent, self-sufficient and capable of taking care of all their physical needs during the flight. They require no special or unusual attention beyond that extended to the average Guest, except assistance in boarding and deplaning. WestJet will accept a Guests’ opinion of self-reliance. The flight attendant must report any occurrence during flight that may reflect that the Guest was not self-reliant.
  - Non Self-Reliant - A Guest who is not capable of self-care during the flight and requires another person to look after their physical needs, therefore they require a personal attendant.
- Personal Attendant - An able bodied Guest capable of fully attending to all the physical needs of the Guest who is disabled during the flight. This Guest may not necessarily be a medically trained attendant.

Essentially, about a fifth of Canadians have a disability in some form or another. Their disability may not be readily apparent, such as people who are hard of hearing or deaf and persons with artificial limbs, mental health or learning disabilities.

In addition, the level of impairment varies widely. For example, people with some vision can be considered legally blind. Others have only peripheral vision, and some are totally blind. 'Persons with disabilities' are not a homogenous group.

It is within federal regulations in Canada that require that our employees who work with the public to receive specific training to become familiar with company promises and guidelines for making appropriate travel arrangements for Guests with disabilities.

**Steps in the Commercial Air Travel Experience**

West Jet has committed to providing our Guests who require special services with the following (see Appendix 1 for a sample of other services offered):

- At time of booking – start the dialogue. Ensure that the appropriate Special Service Request (SSR) code is entered into the Passenger Name Record or electronic booking so all down-line personnel are aware of the services requested.
- Registration at the check-in counter;
- Proceeding to the boarding area;
- Proceeding to the general public area or, in some cases, to a representative of another air carrier;
- Boarding and deplaning;
- Special Services - WestJet recognizes that some of our guests may require additional assistance with their travel arrangements. Often pre-selected seating and pre-boarding are two ways to help make the travel experience a pleasant one for these Guests.

On the Aircraft Assistance and Expectations:

- Stowing and retrieving baggage;
- Moving to and from an aircraft washroom;
- Reducing the possibility of injuries to the employee or the guest;
- Reducing boarding and disembarking delays;
- Making the employee’s work easier and more rewarding;
- Satisfying regulatory requirements, and;
- Providing a world class guest experience.
Examples where training and procedures have been developed to enhance the experience of the guest traveling by air include:

- registration at the check-in counter;
- proceeding to the boarding area;
- boarding and deplaning;
- stowing and retrieving baggage;
- moving to and from an aircraft washroom; and;
- Proceeding to the general public area or to an agent of another air carrier.

Examples of procedures and techniques that would be employed for persons with visual impairments can be found in Appendix 2.

When interacting with Guests with disabilities:

- Address the Guest directly - not the interpreter or attendant.
- Take into consideration the Guest’s knowledge of their own needs.
- Offer assistance, but don’t insist.
- Ask how to assist and what to do.
- Ask whenever you are uncertain.

**CONCLUSION**

Through open and candid dialogue with guests with disabilities and a genuine desire to enhance the travel experience for guests with disabilities, combined with an effective sensitivity training program delivered through all levels of the organization, WestJet believes the travel experience for the elderly and for guests with disabilities can be significantly enhanced.

When the training is completed, agents are then put through a series of scenarios, often involving persons with disabilities, whenever possible, so they get first hand experiences working through a variety techniques and procedures. WestJet engages persons with disabilities directly in the development of its training materials which adds significant insights for our agents and facilitators throughout the course.

The course concludes with a closing section on the general principles of caring for our guests and doing what feels appropriate within the guidelines. This empowers our agents to have some degree of flexibility and respond more directly to the unique needs of the guests.

The employee then writes a quiz which they must get 80% or greater on in order to pass. This result is then registered and tracked in their learning profile and this course or a refresher module is taken annually for changes and in its entirety every 2 to 3 years.
Ensuring all employees engaged with delivering services to travelers, including new hires within 6 – 8 weeks of starting, ensures our employees deliver a sensitive, respectful, reasonably consistent experience for guests with disabilities every time they fly with us.

Creating these positive experiences is not only rewarding for the employees and the guests but it also generates loyalty which in turn is good for the business.

References


Appendix 1: Other Special Services

Seating

- WestJet prefers that all Guests with disabilities and impairments be seated in a window seat that is not an exit row.

- Ideally, by seating them at a window they are not impeding Guests in the same row from accessing the aisle.

- Aisle or middle seats are not to be excluded from assignment for those Guests who have disabilities or impairments.

- WestJet will always try to respect the special service request for seating assignments.

Pre-boarding

- At WestJet, we recognize that some Guest's may require extra time or assistance when boarding the aircraft.

- WestJet offers pre-boarding to those Guest who feel they may require extra time.

- Pre-boarding commences before general boarding.

- A Flight Attendant will come to the gate to signal that the flight crew is ready to have the aircraft boarded.

- The Flight Attendant will refer to the specials manifest and allot the appropriate amount of time for all of the Guests to board the aircraft.

- The Flight Attendant will then escort the pre-boarding Guests to the aircraft.

- Depending on the amount of guests who wish to use the pre-boarding service the Flight Attendant may request additional help with boarding the Guests.
Appendix 2: Services Offered for Persons with a Visual Impairment

Assisting a Guest with a visual impairment or who is blind

Guests with visual impairments might not see as sharply or as clearly as those without this disability. Most individuals who are legally blind have some vision; however, some might be able to see only directly ahead, and some only peripherally. Others may be able to make out shapes but have trouble reading. Only 10% of persons with visual impairments are totally blind.

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<td>Persons who are blind</td>
<td>The blind, the visually impaired</td>
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<td>Persons with a visual impairment</td>
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How to assist a Guest with a visual impairment or who is blind.

- Ask if and how you can assist.
- Identify yourself and your role. Even if you are wearing a uniform, the person may not be able to see the insignia.
- Use a normal tone of voice.
- Ask if he needs assistance.
- If so, ask the Guest the best way to guide them.
- When offering directions, do it in distances, for example say “two steps behind you” or “a meter to your left”. People may not be able to see landmarks. Pointing or saying “over there” is not helpful.
- Offer your arm. If you will be taking the Guest to their destination, offer your arm (verbally) and touch them on the back of the arm with your hand. Don’t take their arm unexpectedly. Walk at a normal pace. The Guest will walk about a step behind to be forewarned of your next move by changes in your body position and direction.
Keep the Guest informed of their surroundings.

- Keep a running dialogue on things like:
  - Changes in slope or irregularities in terrain;
  - Tripping hazards;
  - Obstacles;
  - Handrails;
  - Doors (whether they open towards or away from you);
  - Curbs (specify ‘step up’ or ‘step down’); and
  - Stairs: Come to a full stop. Tell the person whether you are going up or down.
  - Let them feel out the first step. Keep one stair ahead.
  - Tell the Guest when the last step is coming up.

Leave the Guest secure at their destination.

- Describe the landscape or room at destination. Layout, dimensions, other people and objects are all helpful to know.
- If the Guest wishes to sit, place their hand on the back of the chair or in contact with the chair so their knees lightly touch the seat. Mention the kind of chair, for example arm chair or bench.
- If the Guest wishes to remain standing, try to leave them in contact with a tangible object, such as a wall or a table.
- Let the Guest know you are leaving.

Devices and supports

Guide dogs or other service animals:

Service animals are often used by Guests who have a visual impairment; however, they are also used for a variety of other tasks. While we generally associate service animals with dogs, miniature ponies and monkeys have also been trained to perform this function.

Properly trained service animals are allowed on board at no extra charge and are permitted in any public place, at any time. This includes all forms of public transit. They are also permitted to remain on the floor at the passenger’s feet as long as they are
properly harnessed. Guests may be required to produce written proof their service animal has been trained by a professional service animal institution.

Guiding a Guest with a service animal:

- Avoid petting, feeding or talking to a service animal wearing a harness. The animal is working.
- The Guest with a service animal might prefer to follow your directions rather than take your arm, so ask.
- Before opening a door, check with the Guest. They might be using its location as a reference point, or might prefer to open it themselves to protect the animal’s paws. Ensure you know the designated relieving areas for service animals in the terminal facility.
- Escalators can damage a dog’s paws. Do not use the escalator unless the Guest agrees.

White Cane:

This cane assists persons who are blind or have a visual impairment in finding the way. The choice of a cane or service animal is personal, and does not necessarily depend on a person’s degree of vision loss.

Do’s and Don’ts: Assisting a Guest with a visual impairment or who is blind

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<th>DO ask if and how you can best assist.</th>
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<td>DO leave the Guest secure at destination.</td>
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