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Report urges airlines to be nice

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This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorksCompany.

A new study released Monday offers airlines, an often-hated industry, a simple secret to further their success and pad their bottom lines: Be nice.

"Call it a back-to-basics mantra, but sometimes in a technology-riddled world, we all can benefit from a few therapeutic reminders to reset our moral compasses," says the IdeaWorksCompany report, "Boost Ancillary Revenue Through Empathy, Competence and Kindness."

Actually airlines have been much more profitable by treating their customers as enemies. The airline business today is all about promising low fares and then hitting passengers with extra fees at every opportunity. It's paid of quite well. No need to be nice when you can instead be...

Ancillary revenue is what the airlines call all the add-on fees that aren't in the airfare, such as fees for checked bags, extra legroom and onboard meals. The fees often irritate customers but help make airlines profitable.

Airlines typically don't rate well on customer satisfaction surveys. For example, the American Customer Satisfaction Index last year ranked airlines very low, with cable TV providers and the IRS.

The report released Monday advocates use of empathy, not just sympathy, for passengers and for fellow airline employees, which "injects the human element into the planning and decision-making process."

"In practice, empathy helps prevent ancillary revenue managers from adding a la carte services on board aircraft and at airports before knowing how operations, staffing and culture are affected," the report said.

The report noted that front-line employees, such as airport agents and flight attendants, must "tolerate the results of management's mistakes, experiments and dreams."

As an example of an inherent problem, airline employees are discouraged from buying tickets at the airline website, like customers do, and often are prevented from enrolling in the frequent-flier program. "It's a troubling reality for employees who never get to experience flying from the customer perspective," the report said. The same goes for decision-makers. "The travel experience is stunningly disconnected from reality for airline executives," it said.

The report cites confusing rules, such as carry-on bag limits, and the use of abbreviations and poorly organized websites as examples of ways airlines aren't nice to customers.

"If airlines truly consider themselves to be in the business of hospitality, kindness should be part of the mandatory equipment list required before takeoff," the report said.

Kindness enhances loyalty and lack of it turns bad fast, especially in the era of social media when customers can spread stories of their unhappiness quickly, it said.

The report quotes Michael O'Leary, CEO of Irish airline Ryanair, who noted in a 2014 interview with the Daily Mail, "If I had known being nicer to our customers was going to work so well, I would have done it years ago."