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Free at the airport: Cookies, popcorn - and toothbrushes

Posted 1/13/2010 5:00 AM | Comments 23 | Recommend 5



On the Road with Harriet Baskas

By Harriet Baskas, special for USA TODAY

It started with a smell.

Larry Thompson arrived at Fort Wayne International Airport one day back in 1988, walked out the front door of the small terminal and took a deep breath. "Instead of smelling jet fuel," he remembers, "I smelled the cookies from the bakery across the street."

The aroma gave Thompson a reassuring, "welcome home" feel. So when the airport marketing committee needed a low-cost way to promote the facility, Thompson suggested a campaign involving those cookies. Phone calls were made. A bulk cookie order was placed. And soon volunteers armed with goodie-wheeler baskets were on duty inside the terminal offering arriving passengers an enthusiastic "Welcome to Fort Wayne" greeting - and a complimentary, individually-wrapped, bakery-baked cookie.

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More than ten years later, volunteers at Fort Wayne International Airport still give out free cookies; up to 100,000 a year. And this past December, TV crews and well-wishers were on hand when volunteers presented the airport's millionth free cookie to an unsuspecting, but appreciative passenger. Arriving home on a snowy day after a trip to Florida with her husband, Fort Wayne resident Lorraine Leach not only got a free snack, but a prize package that included 25,000 airline frequent flier miles, locally-made gourmet chocolates and, of course, a big box of the airport's signature sugar cookies.

Do cookies = customers?

Everyone, except maybe travelers trying to stay on a diet, loves getting those free cookies. But in these tough economic times, when every penny counts, does it make sense for an airport to spend \$15,000 a year buying cookies?

Dave Young thinks so. Although he admits he thought someone was trying to sell him something the first time he was offered a free cookie at FWA, he says he soon realized it was a sincere, Midwest welcome. And now that it is his job to drum up business for the airport, Young sees those cookies as a valuable marketing tool. "We're a small, non-descript, typical airport," says Young, "And although fares are often cheaper at Indianapolis International Airport and other airports that are just a few hours drive from here, free cookies and other amenities, such as free Wi-Fi and our free Skycap service, help us differentiate our airport as a friendly and very customer-oriented place."

No cookies, but no cavities either

Fort Wayne International Airport isn't the only small or midsized airport offering passengers unusual freebies in an effort to stand out and build loyalty. The Jacksonville International Airport



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Volunteer Mary Gebhard hands out free cookies at Fort Wayne International Airport.



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The Outagamie County Regional Airport in Appleton, Wis., stocks bathrooms with pocket-size oral hygiene kits.

distributes free flowers to passengers each year on Valentine's Day and on Mother's Day. The Reno-Tahoe International Airport offers free local phone calls year-round. And in Milwaukee, home of [Harley-Davidson Motor Company](#) and the Harley-Davidson Museum, the General Mitchell International Airport offers free parking for any traveler who arrives on a motorcycle.

At Ohio's Port Columbus International Airport, children are given free crayons and blank post-paid postcards and asked to please mail back a picture from their travels for display in an airport gallery. The airport has also purchased its own popcorn machine and hands out free bags of popcorn during quarterly customer appreciation days. "It's a great way for us to say thanks," says CMH communications manager Angie Tabor, "Plus, who doesn't love the smell of popcorn?"

Of course, if you're going to snack on free popcorn and free cookies at the airport, your dentist would probably like it if you took a moment to brush your teeth. They've made that task easy to take care of at Outagamie County Regional Airport in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Airport marketing manager Kim Sippola says airport officials occasionally stand in the terminal watching passengers just to see what they need. "We noticed that many business travelers would get off the plane, go into the bathroom, and search through their bags for a toothbrush because they were going right from the airport to a meeting. So we thought we'd reduce some stress for our customers by providing them with toothbrushes."

The airport now stocks the post-security bathrooms with pocket-size oral hygiene kits that contain mouthwash, dental floss and a toothbrush with a single-serving of toothpaste. The kits are provided by a local dentist and since October 2009 more than 2,500 travelers have been able to freshen-up for free.

Can cookies and popcorn really help the bottom line?

Jim Way, a frequent traveler who's also a marketing director for a national non-profit association says that while most travelers probably choose an airport based on fares, ease of use, and experience — in that order — "every touch point along the way contributes to the experience." So while an airport can't control airfares and many other aspects of the travel experience, providing a reliable, special perk can be a meaningful constant.

But, Way warns, an unusual airport perk such as free cookies or fresh-popped popcorn, can also backfire. He says if some of an airport's services and facilities aren't up to snuff, passengers may end up thinking "Why aren't you spending money cleaning the ladies' room instead of baking cookies?"

They know that back at Indiana's Fort Wayne International Airport, where Way Young says close attention is always being paid to the overall passenger experience. "The budget is tight, but this year we're talking about creating a loyalty program for passengers that might offer parking perks or some other new amenity. But don't worry: cutting the cookie budget isn't even on the table."

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Harriet Baskas writes about travel etiquette for MSNBC.com and is the author of the airport guidebook *Stuck at the Airport* and a [blog](#) of the same name. Follow her on [Twitter](#) at [twitter.com/hbaskas](#).

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Its nice to see someone cares about customers Most airports I have been in I feel like a hostage if you buy anything it always cost double what it does outside the airport.

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I have noticed many off-airport parking providers offer many free services such as valet parking, and often times free water for a fraction of the price on on-airport parking. I always reserve my parking in advance at www.clickparkfly.com.

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Kindergarten, airport and airline style.

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Good effort, but I'd like to see evidence that suggests a significant amount of travelers consider the treats a weighty (no pun intended) factor. Most people care about the price of their ticket no matter what airport or airline is used during their journey.

Personally, I'd spend an extra \$100 or so just to avoid LaGuardia airport, but I'll put up with others.

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