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## Why Smiling Flight Attendants Need to Be Part of Airlines' Fee Strategies

By Dan Peltier

*This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorksCompany.*

*During their formative years, children are told to be kind and empathetic to others so they'll make more friends, a lesson many airline executives seem to lose sight of.*

Perhaps the most high-profile example of an airline executive who returned from the dark side of stinginess and a lack of empathy last year is Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary. O'Leary admits he wishes he had changed his ways much earlier after announcing more lenient policies on things like carry-on baggage size and cutting back on the ridiculous sales pitches made during flights.

This change of heart was an improvement, and was part of the airline's trying to attract more business travelers. It was one of the factors in Ryanair's 32% increase in profits last year.

Of course it's Ryanair's employees who seem to wield the most influence over how successful these changes will be.

IdeaWorksCompany.com president Jay Sorensen says poor management of relations between airline executives and employees is a major reason behind many airlines' struggle to get the most out of ancillary revenue initiatives.

An IdeaWorks report, "Boost Ancillary Revenue Through Empathy, Competence and Kindness," details examples of airlines taking steps to empower employees to drive ancillary sales.

Sorensen said he's also "amazed" how many airlines don't offer their employees free trips to experience a flight from the passenger's point-of-view or let employees book their own flights.

“Passengers could care less if management is empathetic to airline employees, passengers care if employees are empathetic to them,” said Sorensen. “But for that to work the first part has to work too.”

Although IdeaWorks projected that major airlines would rake in more ancillary revenue in 2014 than low cost carriers, Sorensen still feels the latter are better-positioned for growing ancillary sales.

“Selling is a crucial part of being an airline employee,” said Sorensen. “Network airlines have years of culture and habit that must be changed along with labor union rules before they can catch up to the low cost carriers.”

“United and American recently had problems with leadership not having these empathetic relationships with their employees,” Sorensen said.

He added that United is probably the best example of an airline that has had an absence of empathy between management and employees.

On the passenger side, the report does give United a gold star for helping passengers easily decipher baggage policies on its codeshare flights with only a few clicks, and that’s something American Airlines hasn’t simplified, the report states.

A few years ago a United flight attendant announced prior to a nine-hour flight from Chicago O’Hare to Honolulu that although food would be available for purchase in-flight, the supply was low so the flight attendant suggested passengers purchase food in the terminal prior to boarding.

Passengers welcomed the empathetic connection the flight attendant established with them and said the airline gained more of their trust.

In the report, Sorensen also highlights a scene from a Delta Air Lines flight, where flight attendants distributed menus shortly before food and beverage service began and then greeted passengers with smiles to take orders, rather than leaving the menus undiscovered by most people in seatbacks.

It seems like a small thing, but Sorensen notes sales increased dramatically on subsequent flights because of this new practice.