American Airlines

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Managing Airline Customer Satisfaction

American Airlines, Inc. is a major U.S. airline headquartered in Fort Worth, Texas. It operates an extensive international and domestic network, with scheduled flights throughout North America, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and Asia.

American Airlines, the world's largest airline, flew almost a hundred and twenty million people per year, on more than 1,460,000 flights - across the US and internationally. To survive in a competitive service industry, American Airlines needs happy customers - and therefore, they need to know what their customers are currently thinking.

AA's surveying falls into two categories: one-off studies and regular, high-volume customer tracking surveys. They originally purchased Key Survey for the one-off studies, which are requested by various departments within the company who want information. AA soon realized, however, that Key Survey would also work well for the customer tracking surveys.

"The great bulk of our general satisfaction tracking is done with Key Survey," said William Mitchell, AA's Managing Director of Customer Research. "Along with about 75% of our specific research projects."

Survey your customers to answer particular questions - or constantly, for an overview of how they feel.

At the time they started with Key Survey, they'd outsourced most of their online surveying to a specialist company. They'd also looked at custom solutions.

"I have colleagues in other companies," Mitchell said, "who spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to get their own survey tool. Which personally I thought was unnecessary. Because I've looked at some of their tools and I've looked at Key Survey and I said, I don't know the difference here. If Key Survey has already built the mousetrap, why would I want to go build my own?"

American Airlines is fortunate in that they already have a large customer database - their frequent flier list, which includes email addresses. This helps with both kinds of surveys.

"We pull a couple of random samples each month who've flown in the last week or two," Mitchell said. "And we invite them to do a survey about their most recent flight; we tell them which flight, which section, we want them to evaluate. These samples are up to 25,000 people at a time, and our response rate is anywhere between thirty to forty percent. We have a pretty engaged group of customers."

In return for participating in the survey, customers are offered a chance in a quarterly drawing of free tickets. For most of AA's special custom surveys, no prizes at all are offered - and the response rates are often better, because the custom surveys are about issues they care about.

Offering your respondents an incentive helps. But sometimes the incentive is just to be heard.

"We do these custom surveys for almost every group in the company," Mitchell said. "Virtually every group in the company, from pricing to the people who schedule the airline to the flight attendant group, the airport group and the reservation groups - we basically do all their marketing research for them and for the most part we use Key Survey."

The specific type of question being asked varies, of course, from group to group. AA has done custom surveys on everything from amenities kits to staff opinion to airport selfservice ticketing machines.

Key Survey can be used to gather information on just about anything.

"We thought, Key Survey seemed to be working so well from a customer standpoint for our traditional market research surveys, why not just use it for our tracking studies," said Mitchell.

American Airlines does a tracking study every two weeks, taking 25,000 people from their list and emailing them with a link to a survey asking them about how their flight was, how the service on that flight was, and so forth - general questions intended to give Mitchell an overview of their experience. In aggregate, the answers are a statistical overview of how American Airlines is performing service-wise.

Key Survey can handle large numbers of respondents without a problem.

One of the things that AA does is ask a series of about thirty yes/no questions.

"They're not saying your courtesy is excellent or your efficiency is good," said Mitchell, "they simply ask 'did this happen?'." The questions ask things like 'when you checked in, were you greeted by the agent?', 'Were you served a pre-departure drink?', 'Were there enough self-service checking machines?', 'Did security take less than twenty minutes?' - specific metrics.

American Airlines found that it was much easier to do these questions online, as opposed to a paper survey - and of course, the data entry load is nonexistent.

Data entry takes time. Electronic surveying saves it.

"With those specific types of questions I can go to operational people and give them something much more tangible than what I had before," said Mitchell. "I can't go to a manager and say his efficiency score needs to come up two points - he'll say, well, how do I do that? But I can tell him that people said that they waited in line too long, or 80% of your customers thought that the boarding process took too long, or something like that. Just very specific moments in the travel experience that we can ask about because the Key Survey environment allows us to ask a lot more questions. These are then taken as hard numbers that can be used by departments to measure improvements."

"One thing that we were able to do with the online survey that we couldn't do with our old paper survey," said Mitchell, "is to ask specific questions based on what the answers were given before. For example, if you rated your travel experience very poorly, I can then follow up with a question that says 'why did you say that'. With Key Survey you only ask people what matters or what's meaningful to them. And you don't ask questions that aren't meaningful to them. If you flew first class, for example, we're going to ask different questions than we do of people who flew in coach because the experience is different - it's a different service environment."

Key Survey Enterprise is a data collection tool for the whole company.

American Airlines uses their custom research surveys to test a lot of ideas. For example, the airline has a relationship with Citibank, which has a MasterCard. The bank was exploring the possibility of offering a mileage card with American Express - a Citibank Advantage American Express card.

"So we used Key Survey to pull a survey with customers," said Mitchell, "and say, 'what do you think?' We had customers who already had the card, customers who don't have the card. And all of this was done before we launched it. The survey said, give it a shot, this could have good traction. And we launched the card a few months later - it's doing well now. That's just one example of many. We survey our customers and employees on almost everything. We probably do eighty or ninety custom surveys a year."

Key Survey Enterprise allows an unlimited number of user accounts. This means that although Mitchell's department handles most of the surveying, other departments can have their own accounts and use Key Survey on their own. Not just for surveys - some of the departments use it as a convenient way to make a form.

There's a very short learning curve. Get started quickly.

Jean Walker is an associate business technology analyst for AA, working on the JetNet portal development team. She's one of the main users in charge of putting together the surveys the department creates.

"It's quite easy to use," she said. "Anyone can easily, I believe, jump in. It's quick and straightforward. Surveys are pretty easy."

Key Survey also offers comprehensive support - through email, by phone and live chat.

"Even if something's not immediately intuitive, if you have to branch and it has some logic, you can always use the live chat and they walk you through that easily."

Beth Moreland, another analyst, said "I had no formal training when I came into this job; I basically figured it out on my own, with the help of my colleagues and the online chat function. Overall, Key Survey has made our job extremely efficient and cost-effective, as we used to do our surveys in-flight as paper surveys - very costly and took so long!"

Anyone who needs information can find a use for Key Survey. Easily.

Ted Lembo is a web/graphic designer for AA, who uses Key Survey to do most of his information-gathering and deporting needs.

"The Key Survey tool makes it simple to create surveys and is a real time-saver in that respect," Lembo said. "In addition, the Key Survey tool reporting allows me to output the data in various formats, and has been both efficient and reliable. The ability to easily graph out the results makes it simple to interpret the data. Also, having the ability to export into applications such as Microsoft Excel allows greater flexibility, especially when working with large and complex amounts of data."

American Airlines doesn't just survey their customers with Key Survey - with about 85,000 employees, including 11,000 non-union ones, the airline has significant HR needs. Janice Chan is a HR specialist who uses Key Survey to help with performance management processes.

Survey customers, employees - anybody.

"The types of surveys I was involved in," Chan said, "ask whether people are aware of our human resource communications, were they effective for you. Then we would ask them questions

about our automated system - did you find this section of the system functional, easy to use, that sort of thing."

HR also asks questions about the effectiveness of employees' performance discussions with their managers, asking if the employee received development feedback from the manager.

Key Survey can give you the information you need to improve your HR practices.

"As a result of Key Survey information, we've changed the distribution ranges on the calibration process that we use for our performance management," Chan said. "We've also changed some of the information that we have on our internal website so that the information is more easily accessible and transparent for our users. We've added computer-based learning resources and offered some additional training on how to have effective discussions regarding performance."

"I personally liked Key Survey," said Chan. "When I was handed the responsibility of creating a couple of surveys in the system, after someone left the department, I didn't have any training - but I found it very easy to use regardless. I enjoy it, and I think the reporting on it is very clear and concise. It's been very helpful and easy-to-use software, and it's led to quite a few benefits to our department."

In addition to the routine and department-caused projects, Key Survey is also a valuable way for American Airlines to get important information in a hurry - in the event of a snowstorm, for example, where senior executives or the PR department needs to know if anyone paid attention to the event and, if they did, whether they care.

Key Survey can be a valuable tool in a crisis.

"With Key Survey," says Mitchell, "what we've been able to do is send the emails out, invite people in and have results the next morning, if there's some very hot issue that needs to be chased down. Key Survey gives you a very quick, low-cost alternative to fielding a thirty- or forty-thousand-dollar phone study. It's fast and it's flexible."