Communication is key

James Colman, Corporate Affairs and Sustainability Director at Gatwick Airport, provides an overview of how the airport is using social media as a tool to connect with its passengers.

We introduced Twitter as a round-the-clock customer services tool to help passengers in real-time. More and more of our passengers are online and active on social media. It’s no secret that social media is often the quickest way to find out news – we all know that stories break on Twitter long before we hear about them on television or radio.

Increasingly, social media is becoming the preferred customer service tool, not just in the airport industry, but across the retail, hospitality and food and drink industries as well. Savvy customers know that if they’re not happy with service standards, making noise on Twitter or Facebook is an easy way to grab attention at the most senior level of an organisation, or failing that a good way to get media recognition. Brands ignore social media’s power as a customer service channel at their peril.

Gatwick Airport embraced social media just over three years ago in 2010, when we first recognised its potential to address our customers’ appetite for instant feedback and information at their fingertips. Since then, our social media engagement has taken off and we’ve picked up seven industry awards for best practice. On average we reach over half a million users every month via our social media activity.

Our Twitter handle, @gatwick_airport, is called out well over a thousand times every month with the majority of tweets being customer service queries. For us, Twitter always had a very clear link to customer service and we’ve gone to great lengths to maintain the integrity of our feed and not ‘spam’ our dedicated followers with advertising.
Twitter gives our passengers a way to provide feedback and comment in real-time. Like most airports, Gatwick is not a 9-5 operation. Our busiest time is, in fact, around 6am every morning as preparations are made for the first wave of flights. We introduced Twitter as a round-the-clock customer services tool to help passengers in real-time when they’re at the airport. This meant training our on-call team and also operational staff to monitor and respond to tweets as they come in. It also meant actively encouraging people to get in touch by promoting our Twitter service on digital screens in the terminal.

Through Twitter, we have a two-way dialogue with our passengers and we regularly engage them on topical issues. Gatwick’s Chief Executive, Stewart Wingate, has taken part in several live Twitter Q&A sessions; responding to a range of questions on everything from new shop openings, to flight paths, to the readiness of our fleet of snow clearing vehicles. In the most recent Q&A, our #askgatwick hashtag reached over 200,000 users and positive feedback we received following the debate has led us to organise further, more focused sessions, including what it’s like to work at Gatwick with our HR Director and a discussion on our services for passengers with reduced mobility, led by our Head of Terminals.

Our approach at Gatwick is always to be open and transparent – we’re not daunted by negative comments. If we’ve done something wrong we want to know about it so we can put it right. We have fixed lots of problems thanks to keen tweeters spotting issues and telling us about them – a broken flight display screen, faulty heating in a gate room or arrival baggage delays for a particular flight. These are all issues that may well take longer to get to us via the usual escalation processes, but we can often dispatch our operational teams much quicker when we’re alerted to the issue through Twitter.

Whether there is a snow or rail/road incident, Twitter is now well established at Gatwick as a place for passengers to ask questions and get quick responses. During the worst snow disruptions of the last few years, thousands of passengers – many of them in the airport terminals and using Twitter for the first time – turned to Gatwick’s tweets for information. Much of our Twitter activity during this time was one-to-one communication dealing with specific questions. Feedback we have received since has shown that this approach made a real difference to passengers, both those stuck in our terminals and in airports across Europe.

During January 2013, despite our runway remaining largely operational, the threat of snow caused many of our passengers – and the press – to panic about their flights, and they too turned to our Twitter feed with specific questions about flights and getting to the airport. @gatwick_airport reached almost 2.5 million people via 1,500 tweets sent during seven days.

Social media has become a central part of our customer insight too. We constantly monitor what’s being said about us, our products and services on both Twitter and Facebook. We share any negative tweets directly with our staff and airport partners at our daily operational meetings. Hearing verbatim feedback from our passengers is very impactful and is the best way to ensure we change and adapt our approach as a result to a passenger issue.

A few years ago, Gatwick Airport integrated retailer and restaurant reviews supplied by an independent website, Qype (or Yelp as it will soon be known in the UK) on to gatwickairport.com. Like Tripadvisor, we wanted to offer people the chance to leave honest feedback on the shops and restaurants at the airport. We’re not afraid of feedback so we were quite prepared to be transparent about which outlets our passengers think makes the best burgers and which offers the best price.
important reason for introducing interactive touchscreen technology.

Pasengers move through the airport and indeed, our physical environment. Online check-in, self-service bag-drop via kiosks and mobile boarding cards already mean that more passengers are moving seamlessly through our airport. Interactive technology leads to a more efficient and passenger-focused approach to travel. Gatwick is well placed to embrace new technologies as the majority of our passenger demographic is already familiar with interactive technologies. For instance easyJet, our largest carrier, currently sees around 85 per cent of its passengers checking in online, and by the end of this month the airline is aiming for 100 per cent online check-in. Meanwhile, 60 per cent of our website visitors using mobiles, it's essential they can check their flight status, find their way around the airport or afterwards when they have time to spare via their mobile while they're in the restaurant or store. As well as physical prompts encouraging passengers to tweet, we also use our surroundings to draw attention to our other social channels. Since 2008, we've invested over £1 billion in redeveloping the airport. The scale of change is difficult to communicate, especially when passengers just see hoardings. Our challenge was to communicate the future to passengers walking through the airport so we decided to use online social tools to bring these changes to life.

To bring in an interactive element we use Quick Response Codes (barcodes that can be scanned with a mobile phone and linked to content). During the construction of the North Terminal interchange we installed the world's largest barcode which could be scanned, from a distance as passengers stepped off the shuttle, and linked to a timelapse video of the construction taking place. It was a really unique way to tell the story through what, otherwise, would have been a rather ugly, large construction hoarding.

Social media and interactive technology will undoubtedly continue to evolve and change at a staggering rate. It can be bewildering to know which new initiative to adopt next, but I believe as long as we continue to listen to our passengers and understand their needs and what makes them smile, we can't go too far wrong.

Whilst social media is increasingly putting information at the fingertips of our passengers, interactive technology is shaping how passengers move through the airport and indeed, our physical environment. Online check-in, self-service bag-drop via kiosks and mobile boarding cards already mean that more passengers are moving seamlessly through our airport. Interactive technology leads to a more efficient and passenger-focused approach to travel. Gatwick is well placed to embrace new technologies as the majority of our passenger demographic is already familiar with interactive technologies. For instance easyJet, our largest carrier, currently sees around 85 per cent of its passengers checking in online, and by the end of this month the airline is aiming for 100 per cent online check-in, which demonstrates the pace at which technology is shifting passenger behaviour. We're supporting their drive by reconfiguring our check-in areas. We've already started to replace many traditional check-in desks with multi-user check-in kiosks to be shared by passengers flying with different airlines, meaning the design and layout of our check-in areas is set to radically change.

To maintain our competitive edge it's crucial for Gatwick to keep pace with interactive technology. Our ambition is to compete to grow to become London's airport of choice and that means leading the way with technology innovations which make passenger journeys easier or more enjoyable. We're about to launch an updated fully responsive website that will optimise for any mobile device or tablet. With almost 50 per cent of our website visitors using mobiles, it's essential they can check their flight status, find shops or book parking quickly and confidently through their device.

We're also installing banks of tablets in our departure lounges, arrivals areas and baggage halls to allow passengers direct access to gatwickairport.com to answer questions about anything – from onward travel to store locations – using the intuitive touchscreen technology. Whilst efficiency is arguably the most important reason for introducing interactive technologies, making our passengers smile is also important. We want our passengers to choose Gatwick not only because of our 200 destinations and our amazing rail connections to London, but because we offer a memorable and enjoyable experience as well.

Gatwick can also expose passengers to its 'fun side' through social media. Unlike many organisations, our social media audience is often under our very roof. Passengers are a transient audience and may only stay for as long as 60 minutes, but their very presence gives us an opportunity to connect the offline to the online in an amusing and quirky way.

Working with Soundcloud, Gatwick delivered an airport world first last summer by making children's stories available for download in the departure lounges. Starting with traditional fairy stories, then excerpts from Walker Books and also a competition to find six original short stories, we’ve now got a selection of short stories especially recorded for children on Gatwick's Soundcloud channel. A sidecolumn wraps promote the Soundcloud channel and every month, we see a steady number of passengers tuning in. To date, we’ve had almost 3,000 plays.

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