case study

acxiom

MileagePlus UNITED

# Member Recognition Initiative a Pleasant Surprise for United Customers, Agents

## Data enables agents to congratulate customers in person for program milestones

For seasoned travelers, the airport experience is usually fairly routine: arrive, check in, get through security and on to the gate, and board. If the routine changes, it's not usually a positive occurrence, most likely weather or other disruptions. The same goes for agents, who check in hundreds of passengers every day.

United Airlines, which operates 5,656 flights a day globally, sought to enhance the airport experience for its most valued customers — frequent travelers in its MileagePlus loyalty program — by recognizing members reaching certain program milestones in person at the airport. To do so, the airline needed the ability to match passengers traveling each day with their program milestones.

### Getting customer knowledge to the gate

A major CRM initiative at United provides the foundation for a number of programs to enhance the customer experience. United partners with Acxiom to integrate member records across the United and Continental loyalty programs, recognize duplicates, and ensure the combined airline has the cleanest, most accurate data possible on each member.

Now, groups across the airline are making use of that data to improve customer touchpoints, including creating a member recognition program at specific airports.

*"The big idea is we're taking information we have collected on customers and finding different channels for how to use that,"* said Ken Bostock, managing director, customer experience, at United. *"We never could have done this kind of program before."*

### Surprising passengers

United ran pilots of its new member recognition program at three small airports: Guam, West Palm Beach and Tucson. The airline sorts the MileagePlus database to cross-match passengers who will be traveling each day with certain program milestones, such as reaching a new status level or program anniversary, or celebrating a birthday. The general manager or designee at each airport then handwrites pre-printed thank-you cards for those passengers and gets them in the hands of the agents.

Fran Cuoco, United's station lead in Tucson, considers writing the cards a highlight of her job. Each day, she receives an email from United headquarters with 5-10 passenger names, their milestones and the flights they are on.

*"We're recognizing passengers who have been loyal not with an email or form letter, but with a handwritten card delivered in person by an agent,"* Cuoco said. *"It's something personal that shows United cares about its passengers enough to take the time to do this."*

As agents encounter those passengers during the boarding process, they congratulate them and pass along the card. The most frequent reaction from customers? Surprise. It's an unexpected break from the typical flying experience.

*"I was surprised when [United] called my name,"* said a passenger who recently received a card recognizing her

### Customer

United Airlines

### Key objectives

- Loyalty program services
- Messaging and offer personalization
- Analytics and marketing strategy

### Solution

Acxiom teams with the airline for data integration, enhancement and segmentation, enabling United to find — among 90 million records — those passengers traveling each day who are reaching loyalty program milestones.

### Results

- A pilot at three airports exceeded expectations in terms of customer and agent satisfaction.
- Recognizing loyalty program milestones provides a positive touchpoint in the routine airport experience.
- United now rolls out the program to 17 additional small airports.

25 years as a MileagePlus member. *"I appreciate this and try not to ever fly anyone else."*

Melissa Jeffries, a customer service agent with Express Jet in Tucson (which operates some United flights), sees customer reactions play out every day.

*"At first, I thought customers would just look at it and go on,"* she said. *"Customers are happily surprised to be recognized. When you take the time to give them a little personal attention, it goes a long way."*

The feedback coming to James Trudeau, United's general manager in Tucson, is overwhelmingly positive and has a contagious effect on the moods of agents and passengers. *"It's something very tangible that customers see,"* he said. *"As recognized members walk away from the podium, others around see and hear the interaction, giving us a higher level of recognition."*

## Delighting agents

Not only does the gesture surprise passengers, but it gives agents — many of whom joined this field because they like people — a chance to deliver good news in a job that all too often involves bad news. Agents report that it helps foster a more personal relationship with customers, especially those frequent travelers they see regularly.

*"Agents spend so much time assisting customers with what's usually a problem that it's a breath of fresh air for them to do something nice for the customer,"* Bostock said. *"It's really fun to hear how a little card that says 'Happy Birthday' lightens up their day, for both customers and employees. It's been wildly positive."*

## Expanding to more airports

In the fast-paced airport environment, United has successfully found a way to offer a personal touch to its most valued customers. The airline not only has the ability to gather the data but has executed this program in a way that utilizes it appropriately each day.

The unique recognition program exceeded expectations at test airports. In fact, it's been so well received that the airline now plans to roll out the program to more than a dozen small airports nationwide, with airline officers visiting airports to kick it off at each one.

The successful pilot represents just one example of better using customer data to improve operations. Next, Bostock hopes to expand the program to interact with customers intelligently in other ways.

*"If we can recognize customers with a card, what else can we do to improve their airport experience?"* he said.

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